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## STRONG, SAFE, AND SECURE: NEGOTIATING EARLY FATHERING AND MILITARY SERVICE ACROSS THE DEPLOYMENT CYCLE

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**ABSTRACT:** Military fathers of young children often endure repeated separations from their children, and these may disrupt the early parent–child relationship. Postdeployment reunification also poses challenges; disruptions that have occurred must often be repaired in the context of heightened emotions on the part of each family member at a time when fathers are themselves readjusting to the routines and responsibilities of family life. The current study employed qualitative research with the central aim of informing a richer understanding of these experiences. Interviews were conducted with 14 military fathers of young children who had experienced separation from their families during deployment. Narratives were coded using principles of grounded theory, and common parenting themes were extracted. Fathers shared their hopes that their young children would develop qualities of strength, confidence, and self-sufficiency. They also discussed difficulty in supporting the development of these qualities in their young children due to problems dealing with the negative emotions and difficult behaviors that their children exhibited. Reliance on their parenting partner was commonly cited as an effective strategy as fathers transitioned back to family life. Implications for intervention programs include the provision of parenting and self-care skills and inclusion of the father’s parenting partner in the intervention.

**RESUMEN:** Padres militares de niños pequeños a menudo enfrentan repetidas separaciones de sus hijos, las cuales pueden alterar las tempranas relaciones padre-hijo. La reunificación posterior a la asignación militar también presenta retos; las interrupciones que han ocurrido muy a menudo se arreglan en el contexto de fuertes emociones por parte de cada miembro de la familia en un momento en que los papás están ellos mismos reajustándose a rutinas y responsabilidades de la vida familiar. La investigación cualitativa puede resultar en una mejor comprensión de estas experiencias. Para el presente estudio, se entrevistó a 14 militares, padres de niños pequeños, quienes habían experimentado la separación familiar durante sus asignaciones militares. Se codificaron las narrativas usando principios de teoría básica, y se extrajeron temas de crianza comunes. Los papás compartieron sus esperanzas de que sus pequeños niños desarrollaran su fortaleza, confianza y autosuficiencia. También discutieron la dificultad de apoyar el desarrollo de estas características en sus pequeños niños después de la separación por servicio militar debido a problemas relacionados con emociones negativas y conductas difíciles que sus hijos mostraban. Se citó reiteradamente el depender de la pareja en la crianza como estrategia efectiva en la transición de vuelta a la vida familiar. Las implicaciones para programas de intervención incluyen la incorporación de la pareja de quien dependen los papás para la crianza como parte de la intervención, así como la provisión de habilidades de crianza y autocuidado.

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**RÉSUMÉ:** Les pères de jeunes enfants qui servent dans l'armée endurent souvent des séparations répétées d'avec leurs enfants, séparations qui peuvent perturber la relation précoce père-enfant. La réunification après le déploiement peut également poser certains défis: les perturbations qui se sont passées doivent aussi être réparées dans le contexte d'émotions intensifiées de la part de chaque membre de la famille à un moment où les pères eux-mêmes se réadaptent aux routines et aux responsabilités de la vie de famille. Des recherches qualitatives peuvent mener à une compréhension plus riche de ces expériences. Cette étude a interviewé 14 pères engagés dans l'armée, pères de jeunes enfants qui avaient tous fait l'expérience de la séparation de leurs familles durant le déploiement. Les récits ont été codés en utilisant les principes de la théorie ancrée et les thèmes de parentage commun ont été extraits. Les pères ont partagé leurs espoirs que leurs jeunes enfants feraient preuve de qualités de force, de confiance et d'auto-suffisance en grandissant. Ils ont aussi discuté la difficulté qui existe à soutenir le développement de ces qualités chez leurs jeunes enfants après le déploiement à cause de problèmes liés aux émotions et aux comportements difficiles dont faisaient preuve leurs enfants. La dépendance envers le partenaire de parentage s'est trouvé fréquemment citée comme étant une stratégie efficace alors qu'ils transitionnaient dans le retour à la vie familiale. Les implications pour des programmes d'intervention comprennent l'inclusion du partenaire de parentage du père dans l'intervention et dans l'accumulation des précautions de parentage et des capacités à prendre soin de soi.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Väter von Kleinkindern, die im Militär dienen, erfahren oft wiederholte Trennungen von ihren Kindern, welche die frühe Eltern-Kind-Beziehung stören können. Auch die Wiedervereinigung nach einem Einsatz beim Militär stellt eine Herausforderung dar: Brüche, die aufgetreten sind, müssen oft im Zusammenhang mit verstärkten Emotionen auf Seiten jedes Familienmitglieds wiedergutmacht werden. Dies geschieht zu einer Zeit, in der sich die Väter wieder den Routinen und Aufgaben des Familienlebens anpassen. Qualitative Forschung kann zu einem umfangreicheren Verständnis dieser Erfahrungen beitragen. Die aktuelle Studie befragte 14 Väter von Kleinkindern, die beim Militär waren und Trennung von ihren Familien während eines Einsatzes erlebt hatten. Narrative wurden nach den Prinzipien der „Grounded Theory“ kodiert und allgemeine Themen zur Elternschaft wurden extrahiert. Die Väter teilten ihre Hoffnung mit, dass ihre Kinder Eigenschaften wie Stärke, Selbstvertrauen und Selbstständigkeit entwickeln. Sie diskutierten auch Schwierigkeiten bei der Unterstützung der Entwicklung dieser Eigenschaften bei ihren Kleinkindern nach einem Einsatz, aufgrund von Problemen im Umgang mit negativen Emotionen und schwierigen Verhaltensweisen, die ihre Kinder zeigten. Das Vertrauen in das andere Elternteil wurde allgemein als wirksame Strategie zitiert, wenn sie zurück ins Familienleben übergegangen sind. Implikationen für Interventionsprogramme umfassen die Einbeziehung des anderen Elternteils in die Intervention und die Bereitstellung von Erziehungs- und Selbstfürsorge-Fähigkeiten.

**ABSTRACT:** 抄録: 幼い子どものいる軍人の父親は、子どもとの別れを繰り返すことにしばしば耐えている。そして、これは、早期の親-子関係を中断するだろう。帰還後の家族の再統合もまた問題をはらんでいる。父親自身が家族生活のルーチンと責任に再適応している時に、家族メンバーそれぞれが高揚した感情というコンテクストの中で、生じていた中断がしばしば修復されなければならない。質的研究によりこれらの経験をより豊かに理解する情報をえることができる。この研究では、配備の間に家族との別れを体験した、14人の幼い子どものいる軍人の父親にインタビューした。談話はグランデット・セオリーの原則を用いてコード化され、共通の育児のテーマが抽出された。父親達は、幼い子どもが、強さ、自信、そして自給自足という素質を発達させるだろうという希望を共有していた。彼らはまた、子ども達が示す否定的な感情や難しい行動を扱う問題のために、帰還後に幼い子どものこれらの素質を発達させるように支援するのが難しいと議論した。養育パートナーへの信頼は、彼らが家族との生活に戻る移行における効果的な戦略として、共通して言及された。介入プログラムに対して持つ意味には、父親の養育パートナーを介入に含めること、そして養育スキルとセルフケアのスキルを提供することが、含まれる

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Since 2001, approximately 2.7 million American troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan; 44% are parents (predominantly fathers; U.S. Department of Defense, 2011), many with young children. Indeed, 37% of children with a parent serving in the military are under 6 years of age (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Fathers of young children who serve in the military must negotiate frequent shifts in the adaptive skill sets that are differentially associated with early fathering and military service. For example, deployment frequently demands a singular focus on the execution of duties in the context of extreme physical and psychosocial stress, a focus that literally saves lives. Effective parenting of young children, on the other hand, demands sensitivity, flexibility, and patience, with the emphasis on flexibly adapting one's own emotions and behaviors to meet the ever-changing needs of the young child.

In Michigan where the current study was conducted, military personnel are primarily National Guard and Reserve Component troops. In contrast to Active Duty personnel who work for the military full-time and live on or near a military installation, National Guard and Reserve personnel can be deployed at any time should the need arise, but are typically not in full-time service while stateside, and live within civilian communities that are often far from military installations. This group is expected to grow in the upcoming years: As the drawdown of troops in Afghanistan continues, and the Department of Defense (DoD) reassesses how to meet changing national security needs in ways that are cost-effective, yet do not compromise capabilities, a reduction in standing (Active Duty) forces and an increase in National Guard is a strategy receiving increasing attention (e.g., Roughead & Schake, 2013).

The families of these service members have reduced access to military family supports, may be isolated from the families of other members in the unit, and may be at heightened risk for mental health and adjustment issues (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, Jaycox, & Scott, 2008; Chandra et al., 2010; U.S. Mental Health Advisory Team 6, 2009). Thus, there is a pressing need for an assessment of the strengths and stressors these families encounter and the development and delivery of intervention services that are targeted specifically to their unique needs.

In recent years during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, National Guard and Reserve Component troops frequently experienced a “deployment cycle” that encompassed a period of anticipating and preparing for deployment, a period of deployment followed by a postdeployment return to civilian life that often co-occurred with the anticipation of another possible deployment, and then one or more subsequent deployments followed by periods of reintegration into civilian life. For service members who are fathers, this “cycle” posed the challenge of reconnecting with family members after a long separation while also anticipating the possibility of another extended separation due to deployment. These transitions from active military service to home life place stress on the service member as well as on each member of his<sup>1</sup> family. Very young children do not have the cognitive capacity to understand these separations, leaving them more vulnerable to experiencing the dysregulating effects associated with separation and loss (Bowlby, 1994). Furthermore, the effects of military service contribute to the service member’s functioning within the family system (Lester et al., 2010), and his ability to effectively manage the transition from parenting to military service and back again.

The adaptive fit of military values with family functioning depends on many factors such as the degree of fit with the culture and values of the family system and broader community (e.g., expressing feelings vs. independent endurance) and the developmental stage of the family (e.g., younger vs. older children). For instance, military culture values attributes such as the capacity for endurance in the face of struggle, adherence to the hierarchy of military command, and a strong sense of loyalty to the military community and the country it serves. These values support the resilience of military personnel as they encounter extremely stressful and sometimes life-threatening situations in the course of duty. These same qualities may be more or less adaptive when they manifest within the family system. For example, a strict adherence to established rules, while effective in a military context, may not be effective in promoting flexible family functioning, especially in families with very young children. On the other hand, a strong sense of loyalty to country, community, and family may facilitate healthy relationships within the family and community context.

Drawing directly from the narratives of fathers themselves, the current study investigated the particular stressors faced by military

families as they relate to parenting and early child development. Due to their normative developmental needs, very young children (as compared with older children) require help in regulating their emotional experiences and reactions and are not always compliant with parental demands and expectations, especially in high-stress contexts (Kopp, 1989). Understanding stress, coping, and resilience in these families can inform prevention and intervention services designed to support them. The concept of resilience can be applied to individuals, families, and communities. Resilience is the ability to successfully and positively adapt to “challenging or threatening circumstances” (Yates & Masten, 2004, p. 522). Resilience is thus predicated on exposure to threat or to actual adversity and the achievement of positive outcomes despite this exposure. The experiences of military families provide a unique lens for understanding the context-dependent nature of resilience. That is, what promotes resilience on the battlefield may come into conflict with resilience in parenting and family life. Adapting to markedly different contexts requires flexibility and an ability to draw on strengths that are responsive to the immediate environment and its demands.

Men’s own voices are largely absent in much of the literature on fathers and fathering, which frequently presents mother’s reports of father behaviors (Teitler, 2001). In the current study, we examine how men themselves understand their roles and support needs as service members and parents of young children. Better understanding of the experiences and perspectives of military fathers of young children is necessary to facilitate the development of effective intervention strategies to strengthen military families.

## TRAUMA AND EARLY PARENTING

Prior research has demonstrated that a substantial minority of military personnel experience significant psychosocial problems in adjusting to civilian life after military deployment (e.g., suicide, domestic violence; Bossarte et al., 2012; LaMotte, Taft, Weatherill, Scott, & Eckhardt, 2014; Wong et al., 2013). Prevalence rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for example, have been estimated to fall within a range of 2 to 17%, especially for service members like those in the current study who have served in combat zones (Richardson, Frueh, & Acierno, 2010). The negative influence of PTSD on early parenting behaviors in other populations has been well-established. Exposure to domestic violence, for example, is associated with diminished parenting sensitivity and increases in harsh parenting behaviors with infants, toddlers, and young children (e.g., Lieberman, 2007). Due to the centrality of the attachment relationship in early child development, young children are particularly affected by caregiving behaviors, yet very little is known about the influence of military deployment and PTSD symptoms associated with combat exposure on parenting and relationship processes in infants, toddlers, and young children (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013).

Despite a growing interest in the parenting of young children in military families (Williams & Fraga, 2011), empirical support has been lacking. For example, in a recent systematic

<sup>1</sup>The masculine pronoun will be used throughout this report due to the exclusive focus of the current study on male service members.

review of parent and child outcomes in military families experiencing the deployment of a parent, Creech, Hadley, and Borsari (in press) identified only three studies with samples of young children (birth–5 years), and although child outcomes were identified, associated parenting outcomes were not measured. In a sample including older children, Gewirtz, Polusny, DeGarmo, Khaylis, and Erbes (2010) examined the association of PTSD in the service member with parenting behaviors in a sample of children birth to 17 years of age. They found that increases in PTSD symptoms were positively associated with increases in self-report of parenting struggles. However, children in this sample were not examined by age group. Thus, while research with other groups of parents exposed to trauma and experiencing PTSD symptoms has suggested a relationship with difficulties in early parenting and parent–child relationship outcomes, it is not yet known whether this association also may be true within military families. The current study represents a first step in beginning to understand the experience of parenting very young children in a sample of military fathers, many of whom endorsed symptoms of PTSD or met full criteria for a diagnosis.

#### A STRESS AND COPING MODEL OF FAMILY RESILIENCE IN MILITARY FAMILIES

Despite the challenges inherent in military families experiencing deployment, a large number of families have reported positive adaptation and coping throughout the deployment cycle (Park, 2011; Saltzman, Pynoos, Lester, Layne, & Beardslee, 2013). As outlined recently by Saltzman, Pynoos, Lester, Layne, and Beardslee (2013), family adaptation in times of increased stress can be understood as a balance between the *demands* that families face and the *capabilities* (e.g., strengths, coping capacities) that they possess. A critical intermediating variable within this process is the *meaning* that families attach to their situation and experiences. In the context of multiple deployments of military parents of young children, the current study aimed to understand the ways in which these parents understand their family processes; that is, we sought to identify the stressors and the capacity for adaptive coping that fathers themselves perceive and to tap the ways in which they make meaning from their experiences.

For many military families, a model that emphasizes stress and coping (Saltzman et al., 2013) is most appropriate. Within these families, early intervention that facilitates a fit between military values and healthy family functioning can support psychosocial resilience throughout the family system and across the deployment cycle. The central objective of the current article was to probe the experiences that military fathers of young children encounter as they endeavor to serve their country and parent their children. A qualitative approach was employed with this understudied population in an effort to acquire data that will inform theory development. Importantly, in addition to the identification of stressors, content themes related to adaptive coping also emerged from the data, highlighting the mechanisms of strength and resilience that promote enduring parent–child relationships within military families.

#### FATHERING YOUNG CHILDREN

There are multiple life transitions associated with becoming a father, including the development of an identity as a father, defining a coparenting relationship with a partner, and making decisions about work and personal life that have import for parenting (Roy, 2005). Prior research conducted by our team has demonstrated that these transitions have a distinct character in the context of military service (Walsh et al., 2014). Military fathers have reported significant levels of parenting stress, and have identified specific challenges such as managing separations and reunions with their families that may involve significant periods of the child's early development, reconnecting with children, adapting expectations from military to family life, and coparenting (Walsh et al., 2014). A service member may deploy when his child is an infant and return when the child is a toddler and seems, in effect, like an entirely different child. The developmental needs of the child may have changed dramatically, requiring the parent to exercise different parenting behaviors and necessitating a re-establishment of the parent–child relationship. Postdeployment psychosocial support may enhance family resilience by assisting military personnel in successfully readjusting to these early separations and to life at home in general; yet, little is known about the normative struggles service members experience as they transition back to family life, and to parenting young children in particular.

The current study builds on prior research (Walsh et al., 2014) by honing in on how men's dual-role experiences as service members and fathers influence their contribution to the parent and child regulatory processes that are critical in early child development. Parenting young children requires flexibility and patience to help children as they try, and sometimes fail, to regulate their own emotions and behaviors (Fraiberg, 1959). Staying calm in the face of a young child's emotional outbursts can be difficult for any parent, and may be especially so for military fathers who are readjusting to family life. Men tend to have more limited support networks than do women and to rely primarily on their partners for support (Cronewett & Kunst-Wilson, 1981). High levels of parenting stress on the part of both the service member and their parenting partner, coupled with the myriad challenges of reintegration, lead many military families to struggle to effectively manage their family roles throughout and following deployment (Lincoln, Swift, & Shorteno-Fraser, 2008). Concerns about providing financially for the family may cause greater stress for men (Zelkowitz & Milet, 1997), and this may be a particularly salient concern among returned National Guard and Reserve Component troops, who in recent years as they return to lives in the civilian community also have returned to a struggling economy on the home front.

#### THE CURRENT STUDY

Addressing a notable gap in the literature, the current study used qualitative methodology to conduct a focused investigation of men's experiences of their own and their young children's regulatory processes in the context of separations and reunions demanded

by military deployments. A primary goal of this investigation was to identify intervention targets that would support healthy family functioning across the deployment cycle. Data were drawn from, and used to inform, the larger investigation examining the efficacy of the *STRoNG Military Families* intervention for military families with young children (Rosenblum & Muzik, 2014).

## METHODS

### *Participants*

Fourteen participants in a pilot study that preceded the larger, ongoing investigation (Rosenblum & Muzik, 2014) were drawn as the sample for a prior, more general qualitative investigation of men's experiences fathering after deployment (Walsh et al., 2014) and the current, more focused analysis. Military personnel who had deployed within the past 2 years and were parent to at least one child under the age of 7 were recruited to participate in a pilot parenting and mental health intervention study along with their parenting partner (e.g., wife, girlfriend) and their children (Rosenblum & Muzik, 2014). Although it was not an inclusion criterion, all participants were National Guard and Reserve Component troops.

Details of the sample population, including demographics, have been previously reported (Walsh et al., 2014) and indicated that the current sample is similar in composition to the military population in Michigan where the current study was conducted. Study participants include 14 male service members who had been deployed within the past 2 years. All were father to at least one child aged 7 years or younger, and 13 of the 14 participants were parenting at least one child under the age of 5 years. Complete demographic and mental health data are available for 12 fathers. Two fathers did not complete the questionnaires, despite full participation in the pre-intervention interview and subsequent group intervention. Fathers ranged in age from 22 to 40 and were mostly Caucasian (83%), married (75%), and had attended at least some college (75%). Two thirds of the sample reported an annual household income under \$50,000, and half were unemployed. Two thirds of the sample had two or more children, and 42% had one or more stepchildren. Half of the fathers met criteria for a probable diagnosis of PTSD on a standard self-report checklist, and among participants who did not meet cutoff criteria, nearly half (43%) reported elevated, but subclinical, levels of trauma symptoms. The majority of the sample had experienced two or more deployments. All fathers participating in the study had experienced deployment to combat zones, and participants were at various stages of the deployment cycle. Due to the sensitivity of this material, we have disguised the identities of the participants in a manner that retains the essence of the individual narratives.

### *Procedures*

Participants were recruited using flyers and staff referrals at regional organizations including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and at Michigan Army National Guard Reintegration Week-

ends. In some cases, fathers or their family members responded to the study flyers; in other cases, fathers were informed about the study by social workers at the VA. The study was described as an opportunity to be involved in a group parenting program for military families with young children. All fathers who were interested in participating were enrolled in the study and interviewed. Each participant father completed a pre-intervention home visit that included the administration of demographic and mental health questionnaires and a semistructured interview from which the current data are drawn. Open-ended questions about fathering and the father-child relationship were followed by specific questions about what fathers were expecting and wanting from the upcoming parenting intervention and what parenting supports they currently had available. Interviews were completed during the 6 weeks prior to the start of participation in the *STRoNG Military Families* intervention and were administered in the family's home. Staff either had an MSW or were enrolled in graduate studies in social work. Fathers answered questions with a focal child in mind, defined as the oldest child in the specified age range of 7 years or younger (child average age in months:  $M = 47$ ,  $SD = 22$ ; 50% male). The study was approved by the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board. All participants signed informed written consent, and were compensated up to \$120 for their participation across all phases of the study.

### *Measures*

*Demographic Questionnaire.* Fathers responded to questions about their household composition, marital status, deployment history, ages and gender of children, and family income.

*Parent Interview.* Fathers were interviewed using the modified Working Model of the Child Interview (WMCI; Zeanah & Benoit, 1995). This measure is a semistructured, open-ended interview that includes questions designed to capture parental attributions, beliefs, and representations of their young children (e.g., "Tell me about your child's personality. What is [s/he] like?" or "How would you describe your relationship with your child?"). The standard, attachment-based, categorical coding system has been validated against parenting behavior and child outcomes, but was not used in the current investigation (Vreeswijk, Maas, & van Bakel, 2012). This measure and the associated traditional categorical scoring system have been described in detail elsewhere (Rosenblum, Dayton, & McDonough, 2006). Specific questions that targeted participant interest in the intervention group and parenting support needs were asked at the end of the semistructured, qualitative interview. Since these questions were posed separately as an addendum to the semistructured interview, responses were simply collected verbatim and were not coded using the grounded theory method described later. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, and ranged from 45 to 75 min.

### *Data Analysis*

The audio-recorded interviews of each service member who participated in the study were transcribed verbatim into a Word document

by trained and carefully monitored research assistants. Although the WMCI has been used to categorize parents' attachment-related representations of their children, principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) informed the thematic analysis conducted in the current study. This methodological approach provides an opportunity to develop deeper theoretical understandings of important psychological phenomena in specific contexts and with specific populations (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999), and suited the goal of gaining in-depth understanding of military fathers' experiences of managing their own and their young child's emotions in the context of parenting after deployment.

The 14 narratives that comprise the data set offered rich data, described by Charmaz (2006) as "data that is detailed, focused and full" (p. 14). This richness allowed for selective analysis focusing specifically on themes related to parenting processes among military fathers and their young children. Transcripts of fathers' narratives of their relationship with their young child were analyzed using an inductive approach to describe and illuminate the meaning of men's dual-role experiences as service members and parents of young children, as they relate to parenting processes. Three researchers independently read each transcript to identify important concepts and themes in the data, and re-read each transcript multiple times in an iterative fashion to discern any previously unrecognized concepts and themes.

Initial analysis involved the creation of "open codes" that emerged from participants' narrative accounts, and subsequent stages of analysis involved inductive development of categories, subcategories, and themes. Throughout this iterative process, codes were defined and redefined, culminating with a group review and the achievement of consensus regarding the final set of codes. When the research team reached consensus on code definitions, two researchers independently re-examined and coded all transcripts using NVivo (Version 10) data-analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012).

Within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted, and results were verified by returning repeatedly to the data to search for disconfirming evidence and through "member checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315). Specifically, to "test" the meaning making of the research team, the fourth author of this article, himself a military service member and father of young children, reviewed the analyses and provided feedback, drawing on his deeper and more personal understanding of the experience of parenting young children after deployment.

## RESULTS

The themes that emerged from these data underscore the centrality of parent and child regulatory processes in early child development (Dix, 1991). Fathers voiced their wish to help their children effectively regulate emotions in the face of life's challenges; that is, to help them develop the capacity for strength, confidence, and endurance. At the same time, however, managing their own reactions to their children's expression of negative emotions was difficult for many fathers; in some cases, fathers' profound loss experiences

from combat inhibited their ability to emotionally reengage with their children during postdeployment. Some fathers felt frustrated that they could not successfully comfort their children. In other cases, their children's sad and angry emotions triggered powerful memories from the battlefield that left them unable to respond effectively. As they described their efforts to reestablish relationships with their children during the reintegration period, fathers also reported a strong reliance on their female partners (wives, girlfriends), in supporting their own parenting. Thematic categories are presented next, with representative quotations, and reflect the identification of common themes and underlying constructs across interviews.

### *Raising Strong and Resilient Children*

Two themes that emerged in these data represented fathers' hopes for their children's futures: A wish that their children would have a better and easier life than they had experienced and an emphasis on the importance of the development of qualities representing strength and competence in their children.

*A better life.* Many fathers emphasized a strong desire for their children to have a better or easier life than their own, often with the acknowledgement that the world is not always a safe place. Two underlying constructs were associated with this theme: Difficulty in fathers' own childhoods and struggles associated with military service.

[reflecting on his own childhood] I've always had such a rough life. And so I always I hoped that she would turn out the opposite of me.

She's uh, not like me, I mean I took the long road, so, I think she's gonna take the easy road and just do something amazing for herself!

Having witnessed human suffering and loss during deployment, many fathers reflected on the ways in which these experiences changed their worldview and their feelings about their child's place in the world.

[reflecting on the real dangers of military service] [Child] is gonna have a long life, you know, it . . . it's nothing that is going to be short. He's never just going to give into what someone else might say. . . .

I think when I came back from Iraq, I was scared and still am . . . at how easy it is for me to lose him. Um, and I'm, I'm . . . you know, I'm afraid for him to go out there [into the world] and put himself out there, but I encourage him. . . .

*Child strength and resilience.* One of the most prominent themes across fathers' narratives was an emphasis on the development of independence, competence, and strength in their children. At times, fathers conveyed their worry about their child surviving in a harsh world. Descriptions of the child and wishes for the child to be "street smart" and "a tough guy" reflected this construct. At other times, fathers described qualities of physical and character strength that they valued and worked to instill in their children.

Endurance in the face of challenges was a theme in many narratives. Fathers saw strength, endurance, and competence in their children's behaviors and expressed a sense of pride and satisfaction that their children possessed these qualities.

[after child fell off his bike] I was kind of proud of him that he wasn't, you know, sitting there bawling . . . But was ready to get back on the bike. . . . It's like, "alright, that's my boy!"

She's very strong willed and she won't just give up. A lot of times she'll want to get something out of the fridge or the freezer and she's just very determined and she'll just keep pulling at the door and won't let you close it until she gets what she wants . . . if she wants something she just goes for it and she just won't quit.

Fathers also expressed their hopes that their children would maintain these qualities as they matured.

I really see him as being a very strong umm, and independent individual. That he won't have to rely on anybody else to do things for him. That he's very self-reliant already, and so, you know, that's what I, that's what a . . . a lot of really good qualities I see in him, and I really hope that [these qualities] you know shine through as he gets older.

#### *Difficulty Responding to Child's Negative Emotions*

Two themes were associated with fathers' struggles to handle negative emotions in their children: An inability to deal with and to help their child regulate negative emotions, and the experience of child negative emotions evoking thoughts, feelings, and memories from their military and combat experiences.

*Lack of parenting confidence.* Many fathers reported feeling unable to help their young children process their negative feelings, leading to a sense of parenting incompetence. Although they frequently described a reliance on their parenting partner (wife, girlfriend) to help them parent more effectively (described later), not "knowing what to do" in the face of negative child affect was experienced as very painful.

Having experienced the loss of missing a period of their child's development, fathers were aware that they were at a disadvantage with respect to how to understand and respond effectively to their child's negative emotions and difficult behaviors. This situation elicited a secondary loss, as they felt unable to "be there" when their child needed their help.

Well, it all revolves around when she throws her tantrums . . . and no matter what I do all she does is sit there and just scream and scream and scream. . . . It's hurtful for me as a parent 'cause no matter what I do I can't comfort my own child . . . [and] with that I don't know who I'm angry at. I don't know if I'm angry at her for the way she's acting or if I'm angry at myself for being upset for the way she's acting. So I don't know where the anger lies with that. [Because of this] it's almost like I feel a loss inside. And because of the loss, I feel almost like a sorrow inside.

This sense of being "at a loss" for how to intervene effectively with their children also led to a sense of parenting incompetence for many fathers.

There's times that, like when [my partner] goes to work at night, that [my daughter] just wants [her mother], and no matter what I do, she just sits there and she screams, for you know, 3 or 4 hours straight, and no matter what I do all she does is sit there and scream. [I feel like] Pulling my hair out . . . like I'm doing something wrong . . . [and] there's not much that I can do. . . . I try and hold her, that doesn't work, I try to let her run free throughout the house, that doesn't work, I try and give her snacks, that doesn't work, I try to play with her, that doesn't work. . . . [at these times] I just don't know how to deal with her.

Some fathers worried that their own levels of frustration in dealing with their children's behaviors might lead them to react with excessive anger. This father articulated his frustrated feelings and demonstrated an acute awareness of his own struggles to contain his anger to protect his children. In addition, he described working in collaboration with both his current partner and his ex-wife to develop a concrete action plan that would ensure everyone's safety.

. . . the thing I think that bugs me the most, and I, I feel horrible as a parent saying it but [sometimes] I feel so overwhelmed, like that I wanna go in my room and take my medicine and go to bed. Cuz I feel so overwhelmed. And I feel horrible as a father saying that, I do, I mean it hurts, horribly, but that a lot of times what I have to do, [is just] go to bed, um, because I just feel so overwhelmed that I don't wanna snap. . . . So like, it, it's it's really hard for me but, but I have to do it because if I don't, I'll explode and I don't want them . . . they've seen it a few times and I don't ever want, they don't need to see it, it scares, it scared 'em, and, and for me, when I . . . once I calm down and I seen how terrified they were, I just, from that day on, I was like, no, and me and my ex-wife and [my current partner] sat down and talked and if, there you know uh there's ever a problem we make a phone call and it's [ex-wife] meets us or she comes and gets the kids and there's you know, there's no questions asked, at all.

*Negative child emotions elicit memories and reactions from combat.* Several fathers described the experience of their child's negative emotions triggering exaggerated responses that seemed to them to be tied to their prior military experiences in general or combat experiences in particular.

. . . usually what triggers a lot of my um you know I guess frustration when it comes to you know just lack of [child] obedience [is] outside sources and things that occur where I would already be triggered by something, which a lot has to do with my own, you know, personal issues, you know, with my whole military things that [are] messed up about me, physically and mentally.

[reflecting on his deployments and then being back home] I mean [during battle] you just, you deal with these idiots that wanna kill ya, and so your immediate [response] is just overwhelming force . . . and by force I don't mean words you know or physical force . . . sometimes it's just like your body posture . . . and so for me it's like I'm terrified because I don't want, I don't wanna treat my kids like I treated some guy that I just pulled out of his house and you know he's got 500 RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] in there that been hitting our convoys for weeks.

Fathers often described situations where, during times of heightened family stress, they would notice themselves reacting to their young children as though they were “little soldiers.”

Um, when I have gotten angry, you know it just resorts back to a military thing, you know, and just my um mental issues. So, at that point when it reaches that I’ll uh, immediately, you know, I [have to stop and] realize who I’m addressing, . . . then I’ll treat it as you know, he’s just a little one. . . .

### ***Conflict About Building Closeness and Reconnection***

Many fathers described loss related to their military experiences and, in an understandable reaction and effort to shield themselves from further loss, described their attempts to maintain an emotional distance from their partners and children. Importantly, the fact that fathers were aware of this process is a strength; emotional processes that are accessible are generally amenable to change. One father put it this way:

I was fresh home from the AO [area of operations] you know, and like (pause) I just, I don’t know, I didn’t wanna be close to anything, because that was like a real bad tour for me . . . that was like the worst tour. I lost [several] of my good friends and stuff, and it seemed like everything that I was close to just, went away you know? So for me, like I didn’t want to be close to anybody, I didn’t want to be close to my daughter, I didn’t wanna be close to my son, my ex-wife . . . and still there’s days, there’s a lot of times . . . that I don’t wanna be close to [my son] because I’m afraid. I don’t know if that’s normal or not. . . .

### ***Reliance on Parenting Partner to Support Father–Child Relationship***

A prominent theme throughout these narratives was a father’s sense that he could rely on his parenting partner to help him readjust to his parenting role. Blended families were common in this sample, such that sometimes the parenting partner—father’s wife, fiancée, or girlfriend—was the child’s mother and sometimes it was a new romantic partner. As described earlier, fathers expressed an awareness that dealing with stress and negative child emotions and behaviors was particularly difficult for them during reunification. This awareness, coupled with active coping strategies, was identified as an important strength of military fathers across interviews. One primary coping strategy, mentioned by the majority of fathers, was an active reliance on his parenting partner.

I don’t have good tolerance [since returning]. I stress very easily where nothing really bothers [my partner] that much. . . . She helps me when she sees me getting maybe in some of my ways I shouldn’t be, like stressing out and getting angry. She’ll remind me . . . go outside . . . walk away. . . .

[The child’s mom] knows her the best so. . . . Like during those emotional times [she will tell me] “she [daughter] is feeling **this** right now.” . . . So I always know . . . kind of the way to approach things. If I don’t have the right answers I can go to her mom . . . she usually has them so I’m never goin’ in blind.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study used qualitative methodology to probe the ways in which fathers of young children describe the balance of military service and parenting. We were particularly interested in the ways in which fathers described the meaning of these roles and associated experiences in their lives (Saltzman et al., 2013). This work is fundamentally exploratory, with a central aim of informing theory development and the development of intervention services. Findings are not generalizable but rather inform our understanding of parenting processes within a particular group of parents: combat-exposed, National Guard and Reserve Component fathers of young children.

Results from the current study revealed the rich and elaborated hopes and dreams that these fathers hold for their children’s healthy development. The themes of strength and competence were particularly robust as fathers described their awareness that the world is not always a safe place and their wish that their children would be able to meet life’s challenges to prosper and thrive. Indeed, raising strong, confident, and resilient children is a ubiquitous parenting goal across families and cultures. Sensitive parenting supports this goal, in part by helping the child learn to regulate emotions, behaviors, and impulses.

Overall, findings from the current analysis suggest that a central component of fathering young children in the context of military service is development and adaptation of differential regulatory processes in response to changes in environment. Consistent with the literature on parenting and trauma in other contexts (e.g., domestic violence), the trauma associated with combat exposure also leads to particular challenges in parenting young children due to the impact of trauma on biobehavioral regulatory processes in the parent. Developmental theory identifies the emergence of regulatory capacities in early childhood as central to the healthy development of the young child (Kopp, 1989). Similarly, empirical and theoretical work in the area of psychosocial trauma exposure have highlighted the ways in which exposure to traumatic events affects core regulatory processes in the traumatized individual. The current findings suggest that for combat-exposed military fathers of young children, the regulatory processes that are central to early parenting are influenced by military service and combat exposure. This finding extends the theoretical foundation and associated principles that drive our development of interventions with this population. Specifically, the regulatory processes required for survival in a military context (e.g., strict adherence to rules and routines) appear to be distinct from those required in early parenting (e.g., patience, flexibility). Further, combat exposure when associated with the emergence of trauma symptoms may inhibit parenting confidence and competence in particular ways for military fathers.

### ***Parenting Regulation and Early Child Development in Military Families***

Beginning in early infancy, attuned and sensitive parental care serves to entrain the infant’s own regulatory capacities at a



basic physiological level (Doi, Kato, Nishitani, & Shinohara, 2011); parents' soothing behaviors, for instance, allow the infant to move from a state of dysregulation (e.g., crying, thrashing), to a state of relative calm. During the toddler years, parental scaffolding behaviors (e.g., sensitive verbal coaching) provide the context within which the child begins to develop *self*-regulatory skills (Kopp, 1989). As development proceeds under "good enough" circumstances, self-regulation becomes well-developed by the preschool period (Kopp, 1989). Many circumstances can interfere with this process, including the loss of a primary caretaker or a decrease in parenting sensitivity (Schechter & Davis, 2007). Fortunately, children are resilient. Although they are faced with multiple stressors, most military families demonstrate remarkable resilience, coping successfully even in the context of repeated deployments.

Nevertheless, parent-child separation and parental exposure to potentially traumatic events place stress on the family system. Fathers in the current sample were deployed to active military-combat zones and endorsed elevated rates of PTSD symptoms. Their struggles to parent effectively while healing from combat-related trauma were articulated in their narratives and suggest that interventions that address emotional and behavioral regulation in parents are indicated. Data from the current study suggest that the reunification period following deployment may be particularly difficult for military fathers and their families as they work to reconnect and return to family routines.

Like many parents, military fathers described their desires to raise strong and resilient children who could cope effectively with life's challenges (e.g., getting up after falling off a bicycle) and who would demonstrate strength and endurance in the face of adversity. However, they also described the ways in which their military service, at least in the short-term, took a toll on their ability to regulate their parenting behavior to fully support the regulatory capacities of their young children. In many cases, fathers felt that their difficulties with parenting behaviors were related to transitioning from the largely external regulatory mechanisms prevalent in the military environment (e.g., issuing and following orders) to their home lives where the ability of the parent to regulate his own internal responses to child distress signals is central to the child's ability to acquire self-regulatory skills. One father described it as follows:

Um, when I came home from the [branch of service], uh, I really had a hard time adjusting to it. And so, um, you know coming from a structured life style being told what to do, how to do it, when to do it, um, to coming home and being a full time dad, um, and everything else, I didn't know how to adjust to it. I didn't—I didn't know what to do.

Parental resilience also was evident among many study participants and their families. When asked specifically about the parenting supports available to them, fathers' responses made it clear that they were very aware of their need for parenting support and, in general, seemed to find it in their parenting partner. Notably, when partner support was not available, fathers were able to

identify other relatives who could help support their parenting. For example, one father described the following:

Um, right now as far as support you know I have my grandparents, my parents, and you know, my sister, um, who is currently a huge support with me being a parent. . . . I don't know where I would be as far as a parent if I didn't have that support.

Taken together, these data suggest that the reunification phase may constitute the developmental equivalent of a "critical period" for military families (Bailey, Bruer, Symons, & Lichtman, 2001). Interventions that help families adjust during this period may enhance family strengths and promote healthy coping as parents and children work to reestablish relationships. When specifically asked about what might be helpful in supporting their families, many fathers voiced the need for services during this period. As one father said when asked what he would have done differently following his deployment:

What I would do differently? I would have made sure that I had different things set up for whenever I got home. I could have got, I would have got, more into trying to find the help that I needed. You know. A lot sooner than what I did.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the inability to generalize to other populations that is inherent in qualitative research. By design, our sample predominantly included the families of National Guard and Reserve Component troops because the majority of military families in Michigan fall into this category. The experiences of Active Duty personnel and their families who are attached to a military installation may be quite different than the experiences described by participants in this study, however the experiences of the many Active Duty personnel and their families who do not live on base and of Active Duty personnel and their families upon eventual integration into civilian communities may have more in common with the experiences reported here. Indeed, as U.S. Department of Defense priorities change in response to changes in the global security environment, Active Duty personnel are projected to decrease, with a corresponding increase in the size and significance of National Guard and Reserve Component troops. Understanding this growing population of families, therefore, will become increasingly important in the coming years.

Consistent with the population of military personnel in Michigan, study participants were primarily Caucasian. In addition, as a function of our recruitment strategy that utilized, in part, social work referrals to the group intervention, the sample was comprised of fathers with high levels of trauma symptoms and may reflect a higher level of need for support than may the general population of military fathers with young children. Participants in this study elected to sign up for a 10-week parenting program, and this may reflect greater-than-average motivation and investment in parenting. Despite these limitations, the current study represents an important beginning in understanding the experiences of military fathers who

are called to serve their country and also are devoted to providing a loving, safe, and secure home for their children. Understanding both the strengths that these families possess and the challenges that they face will help us to design prevention and intervention services that meet their unique parenting support needs.

### *Clinical Implications*

These findings suggest possible targets for parent-focused intervention to enhance the resilience of military families with young children. In response to targeted questions about parenting support and their upcoming participation in the intervention, the need for postdeployment support was endorsed by many fathers. In particular, fathers described their need for help in dealing with their children's negative affect and difficult behaviors (e.g., temper tantrums), and with the stress of readjusting to family routines and responsibilities that differ dramatically from military life. Importantly, fathers were very aware of their difficulties in regulating their own emotional and behavioral reactions to their children's emotions and behaviors. Fathers disclosed that they wanted to react differently, but were at a loss as to how to do so. This finding highlights the importance of offering information and training in self-care skill development that supports emotion-regulation capacities as one component of interventions for military families with young children. Reflecting on this, one father commented that his children knew that he was "All bark, and no bite," but he very much wanted help in reducing his "bark." Another father put it this way:

[I want] better ways to handling uh . . . how easily my kids can stress me out. I mean that's I think that's the biggest thing I hope to accomplish [in the group intervention] . . . better ways to handle certain situations. And by having that then you can take it home and start applying it with both parents.

In addition to the need for parenting strategies that will help fathers cope with difficult child behaviors, the prior quote also highlights the need for interventions that engage both parenting partners together to strengthen shared parenting goals and strategies. Fathers were aware of their parenting struggles, actively worked to minimize the influence of their reactivity on their children, and were invested in learning effective parenting strategies. Furthermore, fathers made efforts to work as a team with their parenting partner and wanted support to be available to both themselves and their partners. With the recognition of a reliance on their partners for support, there was a drive to move beyond a situation of relying *on* their partners to the acquisition of new parenting skills that could be implemented jointly *with* their partners.

In addition to a focus on skill building with their partner, fathers expressed conviction that the parenting goals and support needs they identified (e.g., learning to manage reactions to negative child emotions) would be most effective in the context of a multifamily group intervention that brought together military families with shared experience of parenting young children across the

deployment cycle. In other words, they expressed a desire to learn and share their experiences together with other military parents who would "get it:"

[What I want from the intervention] is to meet other families with similarities. Um, and ah, compare and contrast ourselves and hopefully take from each other the good things. Um, and then come away with more tools [for my family] to stay close and grow together healthy."

I believe [the military parenting group] is going to fit with our needs because of [the fact that I am] um, you know, a combat veteran. . . . [that fact] kind of brings a whole different challenge. Um, because again . . . if you don't, if you're a civilian and you've never been through the training, you've never been through the experiences that you go through, uh, in the military . . . there's a lot of um, a lot of different challenges. And so I think that this is . . . this is going to be kind of perfect for us.

Finally, the combat exposure and associated trauma experienced by these fathers points to intervention components that include trauma-informed care. For example, the *STRoNG Military Families* intervention is responsive to these needs by including a focus on self-care techniques and referrals as needed for individual psychotherapy. In fact, many of the fathers who participated in this group were referred by their VA social worker from whom they were receiving therapy and support services. In addition, by offering services in a group format that connects military families to each other and is consistent with military culture, this intervention promotes camaraderie, mutual support, and a destigmatizing environment within which to receive services and support. The intervention program itself is well-connected to the military community through active participation in military community and family events and active outreach with military leadership personnel.

### *Conclusion*

Military fathers of young children and their families represent a unique population. They face challenges specific to the profound developmental shifts that occur rapidly across the first few years of children's lives, the experience of separation and loss during this period related to their military service, and in the case of the current sample, the effects of combat exposure on their parenting and psychological health. As a result, military families know and can teach a great deal about confronting challenges and transitions, and the work it takes to maintain relationships. While recognizing what military families have to offer, we also acknowledge the need for long-term, tailored support for military families with young children to enhance their coping and resilience.

Early intervention that builds on military family strengths can promote resilience that endures across the developmental course of family life. In their own words and from their unique perspective, the fathers in this study shared their intense feelings of love for and pride in their children. They also were forthright in expressing the struggles that they face in parenting and were specific about the kinds of interventions that would be helpful. The unique needs of military fathers of young children, and their dedication to improving their parenting and supporting their children to thrive,

suggests the need for and value inherent in the development of a parenting intervention program tailored specifically to this population. Our research team is currently evaluating one such program, *STRoNG Military Families*, that integrates many of the elements suggested by the fathers in this study.

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