“It is not easy to spend weeks and months shooting and killing others, and then turn off all of these violent tendencies after coming home.”

Military Deployment Increases the Risk of Child Abuse

Paul J. Fink

This viewpoint examines problems that arise in families due to military deployment. Deployment itself puts stress on the parent left home to care for the kids and everything else, and that stress and other factors increase the chance that the parent, mothers especially, will abuse the children. In addition, when parents return from active duty, they may have difficulty suddenly switching from military life with combat and direct orders to life at home being parents, especially if they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Paul J. Fink is a psychiatrist, a consultant, and professor of psychiatry at Temple University in Pennsylvania.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What three things predicted child abuse by mothers in families where the father was deployed, according to one study?

What Causes Child Abuse?

2. Posttraumatic stress disorder increases the tendency of what behaviors, according to the author?

3. What examples of the erosion of social values does the author give?

Rarely do we think about how stressful it is for soldiers’ wives who are left behind when their husbands are deployed. The spouse must take on all of the responsibilities that formerly had been handled by both parents. In addition, in most cases, the mother is now totally responsible for all discipline and, in the event that she was the comforter of the children when her husband was the disciplinarian, she might have difficulty switching roles.

Therefore, she might become more rigid and “violent” than she might have been had her soldier husband stayed home.

Such switches in roles also are very hard on the children, who might be accustomed to mom as the soft parent. As a result, the children sometimes become more difficult to control than they are with dad, whose role as the tougher disciplinarian was well understood. This change in family dynamics can exacerbate the children’s negative behaviors and mom’s exasperation with the children. Yet, this is only one of the wife’s frustrations and stressors.

Multiple Stressors

Sexual deprivation also can become a factor. One day her man is at home; the next day he is gone. The greatest problem must be the wife’s sense of aloneness, which also might be connected to loneliness.

For those women who had been the more dependent partner to be thrust into control of the house, the money, and the children, many new stressors are added into the equation. Much depends on the predeployment division of labor in the family and the amount of social interaction to which she had grown accustomed before the deployment.