Strong Fathers + Strong Families = Mission Success
Contents

What the Data Say 3
Military Challenges Addressed by Father Involvement 6
  Family Resilience, Deployment 6
  Child Abuse & Domestic Violence 7
  Anger, Depression, Stress 8
  Spiritual / Faith Support, Home Visitation 9
  Becoming a Father 10
The Key to Working with Military Fathers 12
Skill-Building Resources for Military Dads 13
6 Protective Factors Addressed with Fatherhood Resources 16
Creating a Father Friendly Military Base 17
What the Data Say

Knowing the research on the challenges military dads face in being a good dad will help you to be intentional about helping military families and their children have the greatest opportunity to grow into well-adjusted adults.

When dad is deployed, families are affected. A recent study entitled *Home Front Alert: Risks Facing Young Children and Military Families* found that young children are especially vulnerable to a father's deployment.

Nearly half-a-million children younger than six have an active-duty parent. Many children have two active-duty parents. Much like when we talk about about fatherhood in community-based and corrections settings, we also understand military families face unique challenges; especially when dad is deployed.

If we are to help military fathers connect to their children, we must be educated on the challenges they face, and the opportunities that lie within military families. The aforementioned study had many important findings:

- 500,000 young children in military families have one and in some cases two parents in service.
- 1 in 5 service members returning home from deployment in Iraq or Afghanistan report acute stress, depression, anxiety, or PTSD.
- The reunion of a deployed parent with his or her family can be accompanied by new risks and challenges—particularly if the returning parent has serious physical or mental problems.
- Young children’s well-being typically mirrors the well-being of their caregivers. When their parent or other caregiver is depressed, anxious, or angry, they are likely to be unwell, or to have behavior problems. In some cases, these young children may be at risk for harm (maltreatment).
- A key strategy for supporting the well-being of children in military families is to see that the non-deployed parent has good emotional, social, and practical support.
- Families with a deployed National Guard or Reserves member are comparatively underserved, lacking the formal, and informal, supports typically available to their on-base peers.
- Many of these children will continue to have exceptional needs as they grow older.

What the Data Say

As one of the study authors notes, “More than two million children in the U.S. have had a parent deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq. When a parent goes to war—and often for years afterward—families are deeply affected. Young children are especially vulnerable, because they're physically and emotionally dependent on adults, and because their brain development can be disrupted by high levels of stress. When young children experience high levels of stress and trauma, the effects can continue well after their parents' military service ends, when their families may have less access to needed supports.”

This is not to say that fathers have to be deployed to be “absent” from their children’s lives. Sometimes military fathers are present, but so entirely focused on and dedicated to their work that they aren’t mentally or physically present for their children. And, as we have always said at NFI, children spell love T-I-M-E.

Military life can place extreme hardship on families. One of the challenges military families all too often face is domestic abuse. “The military is a microcosm of civilian society,” said Kathy Robertson, The Department of Defense’s Family Advocacy Program manager in a recent DoD News interview, she noted that nearly 8,000 substantiated incidents of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence were reported in the department during fiscal year 2013.

Indeed, the military faces unique challenges in ensuring mission-readiness and in supporting personnel during and after high-stress situations. Leadership, staff, and units need to minimize distractions that take away from focus and effectiveness. Providing support for military families during difficult times such as mobilization, deployment, and return can help ensure that people’s minds are where they need to be.

In the coming pages, we will cover the areas of military life in which fatherhood programming and skill-building resources are beneficial, and how they can make a life-changing difference in our military families.
What Do Military Dads Want?

Our country has a history of focusing new parent services on mothers. The lack of parent services for fathers has multiple explanations, including the failure of such programs to engage men, the lack of content in parenting interventions tailored to an audience of fathers, and less motivation among fathers than mothers to participate in parenting programs*. Although limited data are available on the U.S. military per se, the research literature on parenting and family intervention has often described fathers as “ghosts” or “invisible”**. More specifically, fathers who are in the U.S. military may have military service responsibilities that pose unique challenges in the transition to parenthood.

In a 2014 study*** conducted by the Air Force with military fathers, a common theme across multiple focus groups was the distinct nature of fathers’ experiences, especially during pregnancy and immediately after childbirth. The differences in mothers’ and fathers’ experiences had the potential to create a sense of being removed or even alienated, which in turn, could lead to distance between mothers and fathers. Nearly all fathers in these groups expressed a strong desire not only to support their partners during pregnancy and beyond but also to receive guidance about how to best to provide such support.

When participants were asked what type of information would be most helpful to fathers during pregnancy, often the first response—and always the most frequent response—was information on how to co-parent and strategies for supporting their partners. Fathers also mentioned wishing they had more information on women’s physical and emotional changes during pregnancy, had better preparation for doctor visits, and had more knowledge about the birthing experience.

Furthermore, the study found that military fathers have difficulty connecting to their babies when they are not primary caregivers or providing most of the active parenting, thereby justifying the need for these skills to be taught.

*Cornille, Barlow, & Cleveland, 2005; Duggan et al., 2004; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; Lee, Yelick, Brisebois, & Banks, 2011; O’Donnell, Johnson, D’Aunno, & Thornton, 2005; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005
**Coley, 2001; O’Donnell et al., 2005; Smith, 2003; Thoeness et al., 2011
Family Resilience

Long deployments, post-deployment adjustments, frequent moves and other life changes and challenges can make military life difficult for the family—especially children of military fathers. Having strong family resilience can help grow a family and make them stronger during times of deployment. Wars may be coming to an end but the consequences of these wars will have lingering effects on our military families for years to come.

NFI programs such as 24/7 Dad®, the most complete fatherhood program that focuses on the characteristics that men need to be good dads, and Understanding Dad™, which is designed specifically for mothers and focuses on improving the relationship mothers have with fathers, can be a great place to start on improving family resilience.

Deployment and Reintegration

Have you ever noticed that it’s easier to see changes when you’re away from something or someone for a long time? When you’re around your children day after day, you might not notice that they get taller. But when you don’t see them for some time, don’t they seem a lot taller when you get back together?

The biggest complaint many military personnel have about deployment is the changes they miss in their children. Some returning fathers may be connecting for the first time with a baby born during their deployment; other parents may have missed important developmental milestones, which can be especially difficult for first-time parents. One military dad we met recounts, “Honestly for me, and a lot of people I’ve talked to, the leaving, leaving is hard. But it’s coming back, those first 3 or 4 months, ‘cause you want to get back and get right back into it and try to make up for that time, and a lot of times kids don’t work like that.”

Young children in particular may initially react with confusion, distress, fear, or avoidance in response to a returning parent. The child’s temperament, and the non-deployed parent’s ability to cope with stress, are additional factors that can impact—either positively or negatively—children’s reactions.

Children aren’t the only ones who will change during deployment. Mom will have learned new tasks that she used to rely on dad to do. Deployment can strain relationships between dads and moms. So dad must work just as hard at staying connected with mom as he does with his children.
Military Challenges, Continued

Unfortunately, a return from deployment isn’t always the “honeymoon” dad and his family thinks it’s going to be. Each deployment and return home can differ based on the nature and length of deployment and the changes the family goes through.

It’s important to provide military dads with fatherhood skills and resources to help them stay connected during deployment and reintegrate upon their return. Without the proper skills and resources, dads can lose touch while away. Families suffer the same negative effects of father absence as do children whose fathers leave for non-duty reasons, and Military dads often come back unprepared to face their “new” family life.

Child Abuse & Domestic Violence

Child abuse and domestic violence can be attributed to father absence, and unfortunately, that’s no different when it comes to military families. Dads get deployed and are often away for long-term duty assignments.

Sadly, recent reports* show an increase in child abuse in the military. When a father is more involved with his family and children, understands the importance of his role as a father, and has the necessary skills to be a good father, then the occurrence of child abuse is less likely.

Children who grow up without their fathers are at greater risk for child abuse.* In fact, the presence of a child’s biological father in the home lowers the likelihood that a child will be abused. One possible reason for this connection is the very important role that fathers often play as the “protector” of their children. The facts are clear that children are safer when their dad lives with them. For example:

- The absence of a biological father contributes to increased risk of child maltreatment.
- Compared to living with both parents, living in a single-parent home doubles the risk that a child will suffer physical, emotional, or educational neglect.
- The overall rate of child abuse cases and neglect in single-parent households is 27.3 children per 1,000, whereas the rate of overall maltreatment in two-parent households is 15.5 per 1,000.

**Anger, Depression, Stress**

Military dads can become be angry, stressed, or depressed as a result of their experiences during deployment. NFI’s 24/7 Dad® program teaches that part of being a good dad is taking care of yourself (i.e. your physical and mental health). Good fathers understand the connection between their own health and their ability to be the best dad possible.

A military dad can also become angry, stressed, or depressed due to challenges in his fathering journey. He might become angry about fights over parenting with his spouse or fights with his teenagers about his fathering. He might become stressed because he is unsure about how to care for his infant child. He might even be depressed because of forced separation from his children.

Fathers can benefit from increased skills around their role as a man, father, husband and co-parent. With enhanced skills come increased confidence, and a motivation to be the man and father his children need him to be. Confidence and motivation can lead to healing and a more positive outlook on his meaning in life.

Spiritual / Faith Support

Chaplains provide counseling services to military dads and families, and this is an ideal environment to present military dads with information on and skill-building materials to help dads. If a family is struggling, engaging dad in his responsibilities as a father, his role of protector, and the benefits of embracing his fatherhood role, can help to improve family life.

Sometimes chaplains will engage with military fathers that are struggling in their roles as fathers. Chaplains and military dads can benefit from receiving fatherhood resources that can help dad be a better father, communicate and co-parent with the mother of his children, and learn how to connect with and care for his children.

For chaplains and military dads that want to improve their fathering journey from a Christian perspective, NFI’s 24/7 Dad® Power Hour helps men to become better dads based on Christian principles of involved, responsible, committed fatherhood.

Home Visitation

Military home visitation programs offer a variety of family-focused services to expectant parents and families with new babies and young children. They address issues such as maternal and child health, positive parenting practices, safe home environments, and access to services. However, many home visitation personnel have not been trained and equipped on how to effectively integrate fathers into their programs. Many times a dad will hear the word “parenting” in conjunction with a program and automatically think the program is just for the mother. On the other hand, when a dad is handed something that says “fathering” in conjunction with a program, he is more likely to think the program is for him, too.

NFI has helped many home visitation programs in the military integrate fatherhood programs into their efforts. Our field-tested, research- and evidence-based resources and programs help home visitation programs add an effective fatherhood component, optimizing the outcomes for infants, toddlers, and parents.
Becoming a Father

Home visitation programs in the military are a prime example of why offering fatherhood resources makes sense anywhere there are new or expectant dads.

Science reveals that mothers don’t have the market cornered when it comes to being biologically connected to their children. Nature provides a way for men to prepare for the arrival of their children and to bond with them well after birth. In her ground-breaking book *The Male Brain*, neuropsychologist Louann Brizedene points out that men’s hormone levels change during the pregnancy of their partners. Specifically, men’s level of cortisol (the “stress hormone”) increases. This change puts men’s brains on “alert” for the arrival of their babies. In contrast, men’s level of testosterone (the “wandering hormone”) decreases. This change lowers their competiveness, aggression, and sex drive.

It is during this time that expectant/new fathers are most open to fatherhood skill-building. Take advantage of this opportunity to help expectant/new fathers understand the importance of their involvement. NFI’s New Dad’s Pocket Guide is a great resource to give to these dads. It includes tips and tools to get dad involved right from the start.
Youth Well-Being

A 2011 examination* of data from the Washington State 2008 Healthy Youth Survey found an association between parental deployment in military service [1] and youth well-being. [2]

- For adolescents with a deployed parent, boys were more likely than girls [3] to experience impaired well-being.
- Eighth-grade girls with a deployed parent were more likely to report thoughts of suicide than their peers with civilian parents (31% vs. 20%).
- Boys in eighth grade with a deployed parent were more likely to report thoughts of suicide (19% vs. 11%) and low quality of life (31% vs. 16%).
- Boys in tenth and twelfth grades with a deployed parent were more likely to report thoughts of suicide (26% vs. 14%), low quality of life (44% vs. 20%), and depressed mood (30% vs. 20%).

The researchers suggested that boys experience higher rates of impaired well-being due to their response to reduced supervision, exposure to violent media, and the struggle to connect emotionally with their deployed parent, who is the father in most cases.

Findings from this research are key to informing school-based, military, and public health professionals' work to support military families. Fathers in particular benefit from father-specific resources and programs (as compared to more general parenting programs).

[1] The study categorized deployment in military service as service with or without deployment to a combat zone.
[3] For female respondents in tenth and twelfth grades, no significant association existed between parental deployment and well-being outcomes.
The Key to Working with Military Fathers

The key to working with military fathers is fairly simple: treat them as a father who faces the challenges most fathers face, with some unique added challenges. All of the aforementioned challenges can be addressed, along with day-to-day skills for new fathers, fathers of infants and toddlers, and fathers of school-aged children. In addition, seek out resources that offer skill-building and insight into fathering while deployed, and preparing for and returning from deployment.

NFI has had great success working with the armed forces to implement the same fatherhood programs used by civilian fatherhood and social service organizations across the nation. Plus, we have developed resources that specifically address the unique challenges faced by military fathers.

All of the nation's military and many reserve branches are using NFI resources and fatherhood programs. Examples of personnel and departments within the military that use our resources and programs include but are not limited to:

- Chaplains
- Community Service Programs
- Soldier and Family Assistance
- Family Advocacy Programs, Nurses, and Managers
- Family Outreach Programs
- Fleet and Family Support Programs
- Army Family Readiness Support
- Treatment Managers and Intervention Specialists
- New Parent Support Programs
- Child and Youth Services
- Child Development Centers
- Life Skills Educators

Next, we will take a look at skill-building resources for military dads.
The Deployed Fathers & Families Guide is filled with helpful tips, exercises, and strategies to help military fathers and their families prepare for and successfully navigate deployment challenges.

The Deployed Fathers and Families™ Guide addresses several important topics, including money matters, legal issues, medical concerns, and staying connected during deployment.

Increase military family readiness with this essential guide.

The Military Dad’s Pocket Guide provides dads and families with 10 tips to make it through deployment, and 10 tips to help ease dad's return from deployment.

This handy pocket-sized guide is a compact but effective way to help military dads quickly absorb key information that can help him and his family to make it through deployment.

Topics covered include: Creating a connection & reconnection plan, prepare for changes in your children, and make plans for family time.

View these resources and more at www.fathesource.org/military-dads
24/7 Dad® is an evidence-based fatherhood program developed by parenting and fatherhood experts. Run as 12, 2-hour sessions in a group setting or in a one-on-one home-based program, 24/7 Dad® teaches men the characteristics they need to be good fathers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Research shows that 24/7 Dad® successfully changes fathers’ attitudes, knowledge, and skills and is designed to equip fathers with the self-awareness, compassion, and sense of responsibility that every good parent needs.

24/7 Dad® is the most widely used fatherhood program in the nation.

The 7 Habits of A 24/7 Dad™ is your go-to fatherhood program when the 24/7 Dad® program is too long or intensive for your needs.

7 Habits of A 24/7 Dad™ combines the fundamental fathering principles from National Fatherhood Initiative's 24/7 Dad™ programs with Franklin Covey®'s timeless 7 Habits. This eight-hour OR 8-session activity-filled workshop guides men as they adopt and apply seven helpful habits that will revolutionize their fathering skills and help them connect with their kids.

Easy to implement, flexible, and widely used by the military.

View these resources and more at www.fathersource.org/military-dads
Skill-Building Resources for Military Dads

An easy way to get started with select fatherhood skill-building resources for military dads on your installation. The Bundle includes:

- 1 - 17 Critical Issues to Discuss with Dads (Electronic Download after purchase)
- 25 Each - Deployed Fathers & Families Guide™
- 5 (5) pks - Military Dad’s Pocket Guide
- 1 pk (50) - 10 Tips to Help Your Child in School Tip Card
- 1 pk (50) - Creating a Safe Home For Your Family Brochure
- 1 pk (50) - Importance of an Involved Father
- 1 pk (50) - 10 Ways to Be a Better Dad Brochure
- 1 pk (50) - 12 Tips for Effectively Disciplining Your Child

When dads understand how their child will develop and grow, they can be more involved in their growth. NFI’s Help Me Grow Guides teach dads the physical, mental/emotional, and social changes their child will go through. The guides also include tips for dads to help their child grow. In turn, this information allows them to be more involved, responsible fathers.

Especially helpful for military family programs who work with new dads to teach them how they can be involved with their baby right from the start!

View these resources and more at www.fathersource.org/military-dads

Strong Fathers + Strong Families = Mission Success
© National Fatherhood Initiative
# The 6 Protective Factors Addressed with Fatherhood Resources

## 1. Nurturing and attachment
Nurturing and bonding with your child from an early age can foster a positive relationship, and it may also set your child up for healthy relationships outside of the home. NFI resources for New Dads address this:
- **Low intensity resources for New dads:**
  - **Pocket Guide:** New Dad’s Pocket Guide™
  - **Brochure:** So You’re A New Father
  - **Tip Card:** 10 Tips for New Dads
- **Deployed Fathers & Families™ Guide:**
  Encourages fathers to connect with other fathers while deployed and even create a Dads Group.

## 2. Knowledge of parenting and child and youth development
When you have a clear understanding of your child’s developmental stages, you can use realistic communication, education, and positive discipline techniques.

## 3. Parental resilience
Stress may be inevitable, but you can control how you react to stressful circumstances. Building resilience means building trusting relationships and finding healthy ways to reduce stress.

## 4. Social connections
Friends, family, neighbors, and other connections in the community can give you healthy outlets for communication, and they may offer emotional support and help in stressful situations.

## 5. Concrete support for parents
When you have a problem that requires outside support, it is important to know where to find help. In the military community, you can reach out to your installation’s NPSP for support and guidance.

## 6. Social and emotional competence of children
Understanding your child’s development can help you identify social and behavioral issues that, when identified early, can spare your family additional stress.
Creating a Father-Friendly Military Base

Organization Profile
The New Parent Support Program at Joint Base Lewis McChord in Washington state provides home-based parenting support and education, supported by the Family Advocacy Program. Family Advocacy’s mission is the prevention of domestic violence and child abuse. It was historically developed to provide soldiers and their families the needs to support the readiness state of their families. Home visitation services are provided to expectant and new parents, and families with children through the age of 3. Parenting education is also provided through classes, infant play groups, and Play Mornings.

The Challenge
The New Parent Support Program faces challenges in getting sustained involvement from fathers in its programs due to their work-related absences (such as deployment) and transportation issues. However, the base recognizes that involving fathers in the raising of their children in a positive, loving environment is a “best practice” in having their children turn out to be warm and loving themselves and becoming responsible, capable, and confident members of society. Involving fathers in New Parent Support Programs is also pivotal in maximizing their understanding of the ages and stages of child development, since they miss so much in their children’s lives during a deployment.

The Solution
NFI worked with Joint Base Lewis McChord to educate and equip its parenting program staff and introduced the base to its abundance of fatherhood skill-building materials. This led to the development of on-base parenting programs designed specifically for fathers. Specifically, NFI trained the New Parent Support program to deliver both the 24/7 Dad® and Doctor Dad® programs. Doctor Dad® helps the base meet its need to help new and expectant fathers understand infant and child health and child development. 24/7 Dad® helps the base meet its need to provide father-specific parenting education for all dads. The general availability of an abundance of other skill-building materials, such as brochures and tip cards, creates opportunities for all dads to access materials, even if they can’t commit to a longer, in-depth course.

The Benefits
Since implementing NFI’s fatherhood programs on base, the New Parent support program has received positive evaluations from fathers regarding the content and helpfulness of the material presented. The New Parent Support Program has become a place where fathers know they can go for fatherhood and parenting resources. They can meet other fathers, develop relationships, and provide support to each other when their wives are deployed. These same fathers are now encouraging other soldiers in their units to come to the base’s fatherhood specific classes.