

## **UCLA program teaches coping skills to families with a deployed parent**

by Mark Wheeler

For a civilian, it's hard to fathom the stress a military family faces when a parent and spouse is sent to combat zones in Iraq or Afghanistan. Long, and often multiple, wartime deployments take a toll not only on the service member on the front lines but on family members back at home.

According to recent figures released by the Rand Corp., one in five veterans of these two wars may suffer from psychological health problems, which can add strain on military family members.

Now, a program initiated at UCLA and supported by the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery is reaching out to military families to help prevent the personal and family problems such stress can bring. Project FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress) is now being rolled out to nine military bases across the nation and in Okinawa, Japan.

"There is increasing awareness that military families, especially the children, can be significantly affected when a parent is deployed, and there is even greater psychological wear and tear when there are multiple deployments," said Dr. Patricia Lester, UCLA assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry and director of the FOCUS program. "The spouse left behind is suddenly thrust into the role of being a single parent; routines are interrupted, the children may not understand where their mom or dad has gone, and the service member on the front lines is constantly worried about how their family is doing back home."

Given that about 40 percent of U.S. service members are parents, a large number of military families are at risk and stand to benefit from what FOCUS can offer — targeted coping skills that are designed to be preventive.

The FOCUS program provides both parents and children customized training that will address the impact of wartime deployment on families, and helps them learn very specific communication and problem-solving skills to address these challenges. In addition, FOCUS trainers will provide outreach to groups within military communities to raise awareness about the kinds of pressures families face and to let them know help is available to cope with deployment.

"We build resiliency," Lester said. "It's a three-pronged approach to restore a psychological balance to the family, promote future resiliency and increase knowledge and understanding among the military family culture."

Families meet with counselors in multiple sessions. Some of the sessions are with parents alone, some with the children alone and the rest are family sessions. Each session focuses on helping each family member identify and share their concerns and fears about a spouse or parent being deployed to a war zone. In separate sessions with parents and children, FOCUS trainers teach family members skills to help manage their emotions, solve problems within the family, set goals and communicate with one another.

One session, for example, might include working with children and adolescents to develop their ability to describe their feelings about being separated during a deployment and then sharing these feelings with their parents. Skills are developed and practiced in the context of the family's own experiences — that is, the specific problems family members may be having with one another. That, according to Lester, is central to addressing potential misunderstandings between parents, and between parents and children.

"If there are five family members, there's a good chance that there are five different stories of what that most recent deployment experience was like," Lester said. "Family members often don't want to 'burden' each other with their personal problems, but in these exceptional circumstances of long-term separations, building a shared family narrative can be very helpful in reestablishing a close family identity and building its strength."

According to Cpt. Robert L. Koffman, a combat and operational stress control consultant and director of psychological health for the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, "For married service members, one of the best ways leadership can enhance psychological resilience is to ensure the family unit remains, strong, healthy and intact."

FOCUS was developed, through collaboration with the military, by a team from UCLA and Harvard University Medical School to meet the needs of military children and families.

The team is led by the UCLA Center for Community Health, which specializes in the development, evaluation and dissemination of prevention and treatment interventions for children and families, whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States.

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