

Helping Military Parents Cope

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Increasingly, mental health professionals are providing counseling services to military families. Military parents often struggle with child-rearing issues and experience difficulty meeting the fundamental needs for trust and safety among their children because they are consumed with stress and their own needs. Within this article, military family dynamics are discussed and parenting styles, namely coercive, pampering or permissive and respectful leadership, are explored. The authors conclude by highlighting counseling interventions that may be effective for working with military parents and families.

Keywords: military parents, family dynamics, child-rearing, safety, counseling interventions

In 1994, Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman began tracking families in their practice who had many of the dynamics of alcoholic or abusive families, but had no history of alcohol abuse, incest, physical abuse, emotional neglect or physical absence. The one consistent characteristic of those families was similar to many military families that I worked with, which was that “the needs of the parent system took precedence over the needs of the children” (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994, p. 4). It is because of this dynamic that I chose to use the term “parent-focused families” when writing about parenting issues in the book, *Counseling Military Families: What Mental Health Professionals Need to Know* (Hall, 2008). Developmentally, many military parents who are struggling with child-rearing issues have difficulty meeting the fundamental needs for trust and safety for their children because they are consumed with their own needs (Hall, 2008). One of the major challenges of military families is learning how to operate within the larger external system of the military without complaint or unreasonable expectations.

Wertsch (1991) described this dynamic as the stoicism of the military, or the need to be ready, maintain the face of a healthy family, and do what is expected without showing discontent or dissatisfaction. A second important dynamic is secrecy, or not allowing what happens in the family to impact the military parent’s career. The third dynamic, denial, also is present in most military families as they make numerous transitions and experience issues like the deployment of the service member (Wertsch, 1991). In order to survive, the non-military parent and children often deny the emotional aspect of these transitions, as well as more “normal” developmental transitions. In many parent-focused military families, particularly when there is a child who is acting out or in other ways exhibiting behavior problems, these three dynamics often lead to other characteristics (Hall, 2008) such as:

1. The belief that the child is the problem, rather than the child may have a problem.
2. The child is given a label, such as lazy or stupid, rather than understanding that the behavior may be the result of a mental health, developmental or learning problem.
3. Children sometimes learn early that, if expressed, their feelings may make things worse so that detaching emotionally becomes quite functional.
4. Once they discover that their feelings will not be validated, they may learn to distrust their own judgments and feelings.
5. The child may take on the responsibility of meeting the emotional and sometimes physical needs of the parents.
6. If either parent is inconsistently emotionally available, children may have difficulty letting down the barriers required for intimacy later in life (Hall, 2008; Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

These characteristics, when played out in military families, are a reflection of the secrecy, stoicism and denial often demanded of these families. Instead of providing a supportive, nurturing, and reality-based mirror, the parents may present a mirror that only reflects their needs, resulting in children who grow up feeling defective (Hall, 2008). “When one is raised unable to trust in the stability, safety, and equity of one’s world, one is raised to distrust one’s own feelings, perceptions, and worth” (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994, p.18).

When we look at the demographics of military families, we see that most military dependent children are born to very young couples who have been removed from their extended support system or other supportive older adults on whom they can rely. For almost all military children, their physical and psychological needs are indeed met during childhood;

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however, when children begin to assert themselves and/or make emotional demands, which often begins in early to middle adolescence, the parental system may be unable to tend to the children's needs. Parents who are under a great deal of stress and perhaps faced with a high level of uncertainty around issues like multiple deployments may find themselves resentful or threatened by the needs of the children. The ability to understand how some families in the military are organized, not just because of who the parents are but, more importantly, who the parents are in the midst of the demands of the "warrior fortress" in which they live, is essential in working with these families (Hall, 2008).

Parenting in a Democratic Society

One counselor explained that military couples are often not faced with the typical life decisions or choices of civilian couples, such as buying a home or relocating because of an available career opportunity (Hall, 2008). At the same time, military couples and families are required to relate to and often spend a great many years living in our mostly democratic American world. This counselor often finds it necessary to point out to parents of adolescents that, while the parents may have adjusted well to living in the authoritarian military structure, rebellious teens often see the world in a different way. A typical military parental response to a rebelling teen is to tighten the rules, becoming more vigilant and rigid. This is often the result of the fear of losing control or their place as the head of the household. "Children of the military, whether they live on base or not, live, at least part of their life, in a democratic society; they go to democratic schools and their parents are serving the mission of defending a democratic nation. It is understandable, then, how those who face strictly authoritarian parenting or home life might be confused and perhaps become rebellious" (Hall, 2008, p. 119).

McKay and Maybell (2004) write about the democratic revolution which they define as an "upheaval in all of our social institutions: government, education, the workplace, race relationships, gender relationships and families" (p. 64). As these authors point out, during the last few decades most social institutions and relationships in the United States have operated from an equality identity that values attitudes of equal values and respect. These societal changes require new attitudes toward oneself and others, as well as a new set of knowledge and skills (Hall, 2008; McKay & Maybell, 2004). The military, on the other hand, has not changed to an egalitarian institution: it never will because it could not survive. But, regardless of how the military organizes itself and its members, the military family still lives, at least to some degree, in a democratic society. This means the individual members of the family will often struggle as they go back and forth between the authoritarian world of the military and the democratic world in which they both come from and continue to be a part (Hall, 2008).

While McKay and Maybell (2004) were addressing the conflict in the greater society over the last few decades, their description of the "tension, conflict, anger, and even violence . . . as we move from the old autocratic tradition to a new democratic one" (p. 65) clearly describes the ongoing challenge for military parents. These are valuable insights when understanding the children and the families of the military, many of whom may view the world outside of the military quite appealing and then begin to rebel against the rigid structure they are forced to live within. This theoretical framework can be a useful tool for counselors in helping families understand the need to move from the external often rigid superior/inferior military structure to a more egalitarian structure in the home that encourages and respects each individual in the family but still maintains the hierarchical need for parental control that is necessary for all functioning families (Hall, 2008).

Helping parents to assess their current parenting style, and then to consider how to modify their parenting practices from patterns that are discouraging for their children to those that are encouraging, can be extremely valuable for family growth and development. Whether this is done in a parent training environment or a family counseling setting, helping parents adjust their style will directly impact their children's behavior. McKay and Maybell (2004) describe three of the most common parenting styles: the coercive parenting style, the pampering or permissive parenting style and the respectful leadership style. Because these authors have years of Adlerian training and writing experience, the reader will recognize that these parenting styles correspond to previous parenting literature written by Adlerian writers. The first two often discourage the healthy development of children; the third is not only respectful, but can be both encouraging and empowering (Hall, 2008).

Coercive Parenting

The coercive parenting style is often the style used to control children *for their own good* and is often the style of

parenting used in parent-focused families, as well as the families of very young parents who have little family support (McKay & Maybell, 2004). It is often the style we find in military parents with children who are rebelling or acting out. The parents maintain control by giving orders, setting rules, making demands, rewarding obedient behavior, and punishing bad deeds (Hall, 2008). McKay and Maybell call this model *limits without freedom*. These parents almost always have good intentions and want to make sure their children avoid many of life's mistakes; their goal is simply to teach their children *the right way* before they get hurt. The need for children to accommodate a subordinate identity may work for a while, at least when the children are young. However, when children want to be acknowledged for their individuality or want to be respected as an individual, this style can result in conflict and power struggles (Hall, 2008). "Kids tend to become experts at not doing what their parents want them to do and doing exactly what their parents don't want" (McKay & Maybell, 2004, p.71). The results of coercive parenting are often kids who either need to get even, resulting in a constant war of revenge, or kids who submit to the coercion and learn to rely only on those in power to make their decisions (Hall, 2008), either of which can be destructive to the healthy development of children.

Pampering or Permissive Parenting

The permissive parenting style (McKay & Maybell, 2004) is used by parents whose goal is to produce children who are always comfortable and happy, by either letting them do whatever they please or by doing everything for them. This parenting style is referred to as *freedom without limits* and is often the style that current popular literature calls *helicopter parenting*. These children often end up considering themselves to be the prince or princess and their parents their servants. They can develop a "strong sense of ego-esteem with little true self- or people-esteem" (McKay & Maybell, 2004, p.72). Often they have under-developed social skills and can become too dependent on others. Parents eventually, however, may resent how much they are doing for their children, leading to conflict and power struggles. With so few limits, children believe they not only can do anything they want, but believe they should be allowed to do anything they want, leading to a sense of entitlement along with a lack of internal self-discipline or self-responsibility (Hall, 2008).

These first two parenting styles can even exist in the same family, where one parent is the authoritarian (in a military family, usually the military parent) and the other is the permissive parent who lessens the rules of the authoritarian parent, particularly when that parent is absent. School behavior often worsens upon the return of the military parent from deployment. If asked, young people will say that everything was fine at home while the service member parent was gone, but now that the parent has returned and started *cracking the whip*, the teens often turn to rebellion or other inappropriate behaviors (Hall, 2008).

Respectful Leadership

The third parenting style is the only encouraging style for children; it is the style of respectful leadership (McKay & Maybell, 2004), or *freedom within limits*. The parents value the child as an individual and value themselves as leaders of the family through the guiding principle of mutual respect in all parent-child interaction. Giving choices is the main discipline approach with the goal of building on individual strengths, accentuating the positive, promoting responsibility, and instilling confidence in the children (Hall, 2008). This parenting style, in both the civilian and military worlds, can help build respectful, responsible children. Emphasizing that parents are not giving up their leadership role in order to parent their children is especially important in military families. Combining that with the concept of "respect" makes sense within the military culture.

A counselor told of an Army officer who brought his 16-year-old daughter to counseling because she was acting out. He insisted that she come home at her curfew time and she quit hanging out with the boys he disapproved. She responded with a typical angry look that caused Dad to come unglued. The counselor asked Dad what his biggest fear was for his daughter, thinking that he would be worried about her becoming pregnant, not finishing school, or any of a number of other possible responses. After thinking and, for the first time, with tears in his eyes, Dad said that she might leave him like her mother did. The spirit of counseling changed at that point. With a look of complete astonishment on the daughter's face, she started crying and told her dad that she thought he wanted her to leave because he couldn't face her after her mom left. The counselor was able to help Dad see that setting rigid rules that had to be tightened up every time they were broken, might not work as the two of them forged a new relationship and he allowed her to mature into a responsible young woman. Helping him find ways to include her in setting limits and in household decisions, as it was now just the

two of them, went a long way in repairing their relationship, as well as in empowering her to make healthy decisions in other parts of her life.

Working with Parents

Helping parents understand how their parenting style impacts child development can often be a counselor's most valuable teaching tool. While it sounds easy, it is not; parents need guidance and direction on how to give choices, when to give choices, and how to be creative in choosing appropriate consequences. Parents have to learn to start small, start young (when possible), and be willing to make mistakes. The Adlerian principle of the *courage to be imperfect* also must be a part of parent education. Parents all want the best for their children; helping them promote responsibility and confidence by making adjustments in their parenting style can help them reach these goals. As early as 1984, Rodriguez wrote that in a rank-privileged and -oriented social system like the military, this mix of *caste formation* and egalitarianism may create a difficult dichotomy, particularly for children and adolescents struggling for their identity. This dichotomy can be exacerbated by the parent-focused nature of the military when parents are concerned about how their child's misbehavior might affect the parent's status in the military. Children become sensitive to this parental anxiety and the anger that follows when they break community rules or military social norms. In some military communities, particularly those that are isolated and where rules are strongly enforced, children have little room to make mistakes or test the limits of authority in a normal, developmental manner, without impacting the family status or the military parent's career (Hall, 2008).

It is important to point out that not all military families struggle with these issues; the great majority carry out their parenting duties extremely well and raise healthy children, often in the midst of difficult situations. Jeffreys and Leitzel's (2000) study noted that a caring relationship and low family stress is associated with resiliency. If children have an emotionally supportive relationship with their parents, they are more likely to demonstrate high levels of self-esteem and healthy psychological development. Their study (Jeffreys & Leitzel, 2000) of military families suggests that family climate promotes the participation in family decision-making and is positive for adolescent identity development. Effective communication patterns facilitate family interaction and are associated with social competence. This finding is reflected in McKay & Maybell's (2004) respectful leadership style of parenting and can help mental health counselors focus their work on helping military parents learn the parenting skills necessary to reach their goals of having competent, healthy and responsible children, as well as coping with the sometimes overwhelming challenges they face while serving in the military.

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