Transcript for "Fathering after Military Deployment"

Featuring Tova Walsh

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] Hello, you're listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this podcast, we're going to be talking about fathers of young kids who are returning from military deployment. For a little background, almost half of U.S. service members are parents and over a third of kids with a parent in the military are under six years old. With more than two million troops having been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001—many for multiple deployments—there's a lot we don't know about the effects this has had on military families. Coupled with that, younger veterans have had much higher unemployment rates following 9/11 than their non-veteran peers, but the reasons behind this aren't necessarily clear. Additionally, a recent *Future of Children* report on military children and families noted that returning service members often experience a significant drop in pay when they leave active duty and return to civilian work.

Dr. Tova Walsh, a Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholar at the University of Wisconsin, says that we know that deployment is a difficult time for families but haven't looked as much at how reunification can offer a different set of challenges. In a paper in the February 2014 issue of *Health and Social Work*, Walsh and her coauthors at the University of Michigan report on what they learned from a series of interviews with military dads who recently returned from a deployment. The population she worked with could be described as low to moderate income and many were unemployed at the time of the interviews. More on that in a bit.

Let's turn to Dr. Walsh to learn more about how this study took shape out of a larger project designed to support military families.

[Walsh] The larger investigation is of an intervention called "strong military families" that's designed to promote positive parenting in military families with young children. It includes content around parenting in ways that would be relevant to all parents, but also that would be relevant to some of the particular challenges that military families face. And

it's a group-based intervention so one of the real strengths of the intervention is that military families come together to participate in these groups over a period of ten weeks.

[Chancellor] The population Walsh and her coauthors worked with on this project were National Guard and Reserve families in Michigan. About two-thirds reported annual household incomes under $50,000 and half that number reported incomes of less than $30,000. And, at the time of the interviews, fully half of the sample was unemployed.

[Walsh] Really, the military population in Michigan is not active duty, it's National Guard and Reserve. And so these are families, many of whom come from low-income and rural communities and who are dispersed across the state and so they are facing challenges of being deployed, called up and deployed and the families then of these soldiers are at home in communities where there isn't kind of a structure of support for military families or even necessarily much of a recognition of the experience they're having, of having a member of the household is deployed and the level of stress and worry that that puts on the parent who remains home and the on the children in the household. And, it was really very compelling as I started to learn about it, to kind of understand the needs that were there.

[Chancellor] Even though reunification can be a very happy time, we can see that there is this challenge here in which the soldier returning from deployment will likely be experiencing high levels of stress themselves, but is also returning to a partner who has carried the brunt of the family load in their partner's absence. Walsh says that one of the strengths of Strong Military Families is that it involves the whole family, so there's programming for the kids and for the partners, not just the returning service member. For the interviews with fathers that Walsh conducted for this paper, she focused on questions about parenting and the relationship with the child, and these were preschool age kids, so 2 to 5 years old.

[Walsh] Most of our sample had deployed more than once and so these are men who in the period that their children have gone birth to five have more than one time deployed for a period of up to a year. And so thinking about early child development and kind of the huge leaps that are made in a year of a child's life. It's pretty profound to imagine leaving when a child is one and coming home to a two year old—it's a whole new child that you have to get to know, their capacities have grown so enormously, they've changed so much so a lot of what I'm learning from this project is hearing from fathers about what that was like to leave one child behind and come home to a new child and have to adjust to a basically having to come home and reconnect and reestablish a relationship to a child who had changed a great deal. And also for the fathers, a real challenge was having to kind of recalibrate their expectations in terms of having one sense when you left of where your child was at what they needed from you and then the needs are pretty different when you come home.

[Chancellor] For these fathers that are coming home, they're not only returning to a child that has changed a lot and trying to reintegrate into civilian life but they're also returning to a partner who has understandably been under high levels of stress during the deployment as well.

[Walsh] That's really not surprising when you think about it, but it is interesting that research is only recently catching up to that reality and documenting it, documenting that levels of mental health challenges, and the levels of parenting stress are just as high in the partner who remains at home as in the partner who deploys. And, in the perspective of a young child, which is often sort of the perspective that I take in my research and the perspective that I'm thinking about when I'm designing interventions, the young child has, kind of two things going on in terms of one parent being away and they're dealing with kind of the grief and the loss of being separated from one parent. At the same time then it means that they need to rely more on the parent that is at home and that parent is dealing with so much stress and that parent is now carrying the household on their own and balancing all of the needs of the family and their own work responsibilities and whatever they may have going on and so the child is relying a lot on a parent who is under a lot of stress. So, for the children, it's a pretty challenging situation as well. And since these are very young children, they're not able to articulate that and they express that in their behavior, but it's also sometimes challenging for parents to be able to recognize what the kids are trying to communicate when the kids are that young and not able to say how difficult it is.

[Chancellor] We can imagine how this can create a disconnect. As these fathers are trying to step back into normal parenting roles, it can be challenging because the children are going through a big transition themselves. Walsh says she heard many times that these men were really looking for strategies and support to be able to build back these relationships with their kids.

[Walsh] I was asking them a series of questions about their child, about their relationship with their child, about their parenting goals and challenges, about the type of relationship they wanted to have with their child in the future, about the things that were causing stress in the relationship now. And, in talking to these fathers, a few themes emerged. First and foremost, the fathers were really invested in their relationships with their young children and I heard a lot from fathers about the kind of relationships that they wanted to have and wanted to build with their children. They talked about wanting to raise children who were strong and independent. And there was really kind of an emphasis on strength and independence and kids being smart and resilient. They also wanted to be very close to their children and talked a lot about wanting their children to have a better life than they had had.

[Chancellor] The fathers also talked about the challenges they were having. A lot of these had to do with challenging behavior from their children—these were preschool age kids, so Walsh

explains that the behavior was about what you would expect, having tantrums, pushing limits, ignoring directions, and other normal preschool behaviors. . .

[Walsh] A lot of the ways they're behaving can be challenging for a parent and so this was challenging for them in the way that it would be for any parent but it was also compounded because a lot of these fathers were struggling with PTSD and when the kids would cry or act out or be loud, sometimes that could be a trigger for some of their symptoms. They talked about having a lot of trouble with reining in tempers and sort of knowing what to expect from a young child. They talked about having to make a shift from being in a military environment and things were pretty regulated and when somebody above you tells you what to do, you do it. When you tell someone below what to do, they do it. They were having to understand that, although there is kind of a hierarchy in a household, when you tell a young child what to do, they're not necessarily going to do it in the same way that you would expect to see within a unit.

[Chancellor] So it was tough for some of the fathers to adjust their expectations from military to home life and to know how to appropriately react to challenging behaviors. Walsh says that one of the things that several of the men talked about was leaning on their partners for support.

[Walsh] A lot of what I heard was just how important their partner was both in supporting them to reconnect with their child but also in helping them recognize when they were getting upset and encouraging them to walk away or helping them to kind of monitor their own reactions and be able to be responsive to the child without getting too worked up. A lot of the men talked about various coping strategies they had in terms of taking a break. Oftentimes it connected to exercise, they would work out or there were things they would do to let off steam. And they talked about sometimes knowing when they needed that, but also really counting on their partners to let them know when it was time to do that.

[Chancellor] While it sounds like a lot of what is going on here could be seen as sort of universal challenges for parents of young children, Walsh says that there's a particular context here, for dads that have been away from their families for a long time – some of the dads reported not being totally sure of their place in the home, or that the family's new routines weren't as dependent on them or perhaps don't seem to leave room for their parenting style. Additionally, at least among this sample, there was the additional challenge for many of these men of finding work and managing financial stresses alongside family concerns and stress related to their deployments.

[Walsh] The real challenge I think for a lot of these dads too, was that when the kids are so young and there's a gap of as much as a year, some of the fathers talked about being really surprised and distressed that the child didn't remember them or remember them in the way they expected. So, a child who that felt really close and connected to and knew they had a strong bond when they left, they came home and the child is kind of anxious and

clinging to the mom. If you're leaving when you have a one-year old and come home to a two-year old, the two year old isn't familiar with you anymore.

[Chancellor] These sorts of post-deployment issues that many military families are facing haven't seen as much research coverage and Walsh says that it brings up lots questions, including what sort of impact these deployments will have on families in the long term.

[Walsh] I think it will be interesting to follow up with some of these families down the road and understand how they grow together over time and what the challenges might be down the road. Are there lasting effects from the deployment on the parent-child relationship and if they effects are different for some families than for others than what can we learn about why some families are more resilient than others in terms of reconnecting as a family unit? Another interesting research direction is that we have a lot of troops coming home now. This is a period of time where we have a draw down happening in Afghanistan. And I think there is a going to be a larger population of families that are facing the kinds of struggles that I describe in that paper. So, learning about the needs of families with children at different ages and in different contexts. The needs of National Guardsmen may be pretty different than active duty families. We're also going to see active duty families who are demobilizing and reengaging in civilian populations and seeing what the challenges may be for those families

[Chancellor] Walsh says there's a lot of opportunity here to learn about what these families need and the best ways to provide them that support. Also, as we see the drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's important to remember that the impacts on these families may be lasting.

Thanks to Tova Walsh for talking to us about this research. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.