

Chapter 10

Parent-Child Separation: Children and Family Adjustment in the Context of Parental Migration, Deployment, and Incarceration



Liu Bai and Lauren Newmyer

There are many reasons for the physical separation of children from their parents. These include divorce and union dissolution, migration and deportation, military deployment, incarceration, and parental death. A variety of factors, such as the contexts in which the separation takes place and the characteristics of parents, children, and their relationships, may shape the impact of parental separation on children's well-being—including their socioemotional development, health, education, and transitions into adulthood. The chapters in this volume aim to improve our understanding of the influence of parent-child separation on outcomes of children, parents, and families by focusing on three contexts that are increasingly common in the United States and can lead to prolonged separations (i.e., longer than days or weeks; Waddoups et al., 2019): parental migration and deportation, parental military deployment, and parental incarceration. These contexts share some similarities. All three cause separations from children based on structures and forces external to families themselves. There are also differences in the ways these types of separations may impact children. For example, there are some institutional supports for military families that are not available to families separated by deportation. And there may be stigma associated with some causes of parent-child separation, such as parental incarceration (Copp et al., Chap. 6). In this closing chapter, we first review the research presented in this volume by focusing on four themes: (1) parent-child separation and individual outcomes for children and caregivers; (2) parent-child separation and family processes; (3) multiple adversities among families experiencing parental separation; and (4) resilience in the contexts of parent-child separation.

Lauren Newmyer contributed equally with all other contributors.

L. Bai (✉) · L. Newmyer
Penn State, University Park, PA, USA
e-mail: lb313@psu.edu

Building on these important contributions, we end this chapter with suggestions for future research directions, policy, and interventions.

Parent-Child Separation and Family Members' Outcomes

Attachment theory posits that prolonged separation between caregivers and children may have adverse and long-lasting effects on child development, especially during early childhood (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Being separated from caregivers or being threatened by parental separation can adversely influence child adjustment in a variety of domains, such as psychological and behavioral adjustment (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Fairbank et al., Chap. 8) and educational performance (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., Chap. 1). The research presented in this volume demonstrates that children experience multiple negative feelings as a result of their separation from parents, such as sadness, distress, and anxiety (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Poehlmann-Tynan, Chap. 4). Developmental and life-course perspectives also suggest that we should expect parent-child separation to influence child adjustment over time, although less is known about how long the effects of parent-child separation may last and whether they will accumulate, remain, or recede as children grow up. Dreby (Chap. 2) found that many young adults with childhood histories of parental separation due to immigration enforcement still reported feelings of trauma or loss.

Parent-child separation influences not only child outcomes but also parental well-being. Cardoso et al. (Chap. 3) found poor mental health and self-blame among mothers migrating without their children. In families with military deployment experiences, both the service members and their spouses at home are at higher risk for mental health problems (Donoho et al., 2018; Tanielian et al., 2008), which may in turn be associated with poor child outcomes (Copp et al., Chap. 6; Fairbank et al., Chap. 8; Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9). In sum, parent-child separation is a family stressor that can put both parents' and children's adjustment at risk. However, the impact of parent-child separation varies across different types of families and across different contexts of separation—a topic to which we will return later in this chapter.

Parent-Child Separation and Family Processes

Family systems theory highlights the interdependence among family subsystems (Cox & Paley, 1997), suggesting that parent-child separation may serve as a shared stressor that disrupts dyadic and larger subsystems (e.g., the sibling subsystem) as well as family functioning overall. Maintaining connections between the separated parents and the remaining family members can be challenging for families during a parent-child separation. Indeed, several chapters highlight how parent-child separation experiences undermine parent-child relationships (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Dreby, Chap. 2; Turney & Marín, Chap. 5). Other studies have linked parent-child

separation to poor parenting quality and lower parenting confidence (Copp et al., Chap. 6; Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9). Among families that experienced separation due to parental migration, parents also experienced high levels of parenting stress during their reunification with their children (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3). Thus, the disruption of parenting and parent-child relationships can be key mechanisms through which parent-child separation influences child outcomes (Wadsworth et al., Chap. 7; Palmer, 2008).

Experiencing Parental Separation: Multiple Adversities Among Families

Families with parental separation experiences are also more likely to experience other types of adversities or risks, such as housing instability, frequent moves, economic hardship, food insecurity, and parental mental health problems (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Landale et al., 2014). The risk factors that co-occur with parent-child separation can vary across families, partially depending on the contexts of separations. For example, families experiencing parental incarceration and parental deportation are at high risk for economic disadvantages and unemployment (Copp et al., Chap. 6). Although families with parental military deployments have relatively steady income and universal health care (Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013), they face some unique challenges, such as frequent relocation and risk of parental (physical and psychological) injury or even death (Cozza, 2014; Palmer, 2008).

Although parent-child separation may engender family risk (e.g., parental post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of combat experience; the stigma associated with parental incarceration), researchers also find that some family risk factors are evident prior to parent-child separation—*preexisting* factors—and *remain* during and after the separation period. Copp et al. (Chap. 6) found that parents with incarceration experiences exhibit more problem behaviors (i.e., criminal involvement, substance use, and violence at home) over time compared with their peers without incarceration experiences. They also found that incarcerated parents were more likely to have family members and friends who had engaged in deviant behaviors. These findings suggested that problem behaviors may be preexisting and recurrent features of the family climate for some families that experience parental incarceration (Copp et al., Chap. 6; Giordano et al., 2019).

The multiple risks and vulnerabilities among families experiencing parental separation make it difficult to isolate the effects of parent-child separation. Instead of trying to separate the influence of each risk factor, several chapters in this volume provide insight into the effects of preexisting and ongoing family risk factors on individual and family outcomes for families experiencing parent-child separation. These findings highlight the combined roles of parental mental health, parenting, and family relationships on child adjustment in such families (Copp et al., Chap. 6;

Fairbank et al., Chap. 8; Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9). Other research demonstrates that parent-child separation can magnify the adverse effects of other risks on individual outcomes. Copp et al. (Chap. 6) found that the linkages between parental incarceration histories and child behavioral problems were exacerbated by lower levels of positive parenting behaviors. Poehlmann-Tynan (Chap 4) found positive linkages between preexisting stress symptoms and dysregulated stress responses in children who witnessed a paternal arrest. Emotional symptoms in children were directly associated with poorer child mental health, and this association was stronger for children who felt distressed about witnessing a paternal arrest (Poehlmann-Tynan, Chap 4). These findings underscore the importance of understanding the joint and interactive effects of parent-child separation and other family risk factors.

Resilience in the Context of Parent-Child Separation

Although adverse effects of parent-child separation on family members' adjustment and family processes have been documented, the impacts of parent-child separation are heterogeneous. First, the effects of parent-child separation on children's outcomes can differ as a function of the type, timing, frequency, and length of parental separation. For instance, Fairbank et al. (Chap. 8) found that the impact of parental military deployment on child disorders was moderated by the type of military deployment, length of deployment, and gender of the deployed parent. Wadsworth et al. (Chap. 7) also note that child health outcomes varied by the type of parental separation: Children who experienced parental deployment had lower risks of poor health and development outcomes than children who experienced parental incarceration. Moreover, children who experienced both types of separation evidenced the worst outcomes.

In addition, the consequences of parent-child separation are not uniformly negative. Fairbank et al. (Chap. 8) found that recent parental military deployment was unrelated to child mental health issues, with only one exception: children with experience of parental military deployment had higher levels of behavioral problems. Dreby (Chap. 2) found that many young adults with childhood histories of parental immigration reported feelings of trauma or loss, but some adults overcame and grew from such adverse experiences, evidence of individual resilience over time. Similarly, Turney and Marín (Chap. 5) found that although some father-child relationships were disrupted by paternal incarceration, others did not appear to be influenced by this experience. And in still other cases, children were able to rebuild positive relationships with their incarcerated fathers, another example of a resilience process.

More studies are needed to understand the factors that may protect children or help them recover from adverse effects of parent-child separation. And the chapters in this volume provide insights on potential resilience factors. First, studies have suggested that providing developmentally appropriate explanations of parental separation has helped to protect children from negative implications of parental

separation (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Poehlmann-Tynan, Chap. 4). Second, the authors emphasized the importance of maintaining positive communication with separated parents to enhance parent-child relationship quality (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Turney & Marín, Chap. 5). Third, social supports within and outside of the family—such as secure attachment to at-home caregivers and supportive school environments—have proven to be key resources for overcoming adverse effects of parent-child separation (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., Chap. 1; Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Dreby, Chap. 2; Poehlmann-Tynan, Chap. 4; Wadsworth et al., Chap. 7).

Future Directions

The research presented in this volume will help guide future research by explicating the similarities in risks and challenges faced by parents and children separated due to several different structural institutional forces in the US. Here we discuss the strengths of existing work, potential for new methodologies and data collection, and areas of future inquiry.

Filling in the Gaps

First, we endorse the authors' suggestions for filling gaps in our understanding for each type of family separation discussed in this volume. There are clearly areas in need of further research in order to develop appropriate supports for these families. One example is separation due to migration that stems from restrictive immigration policies. Although children may not be directly involved, effects on other family members may have spillover effects on their daily lives and relationship experiences (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., Chap. 1; Dreby, Chap. 2; Cardoso et al., Chap. 3). Future research should consider not only how policy shapes parent-children separation and outcomes, but also how it affects other family members. A second example is maternal military deployment, which will be an essential area of inquiry as more women become active members of the military (Fairbank et al., Chap. 8; Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9; Wadsworth et al., Chap. 7). Fairbank et al. (Chap. 8) noted that examining households with female service members might provide valuable insights into how the gender of the deployed parent shapes the effects of these separations on families. Lastly, Copp (Chap. 6) argued that focusing on the separation event itself (i.e., incarceration) and not on the events leading up to the separation is a limitation of some prior research. Future studies should investigate parent-child separation as a process to better understand parent-child outcomes.

Another direction for future research is to collect data from larger samples of families. Attention to sampling may not only increase the generalizability of the findings, but also allow use of advanced statistical analyses to address novel questions. Over-sampling key subgroups such as female service members, for example,

may provide novel insights into factors that increase the risk of or promote resilience in response to parent-child separation.

Finally, this volume covers three types of parent-child separations: migration, military deployment, and incarceration. However, some families undergo more than one of these separations as well as other types of separation (e.g., parental divorce; Dreby, Chap. 2). Future research should consider how children and families are affected when they experience different patterns of parent-child separations. Additionally, as we highlighted above, although the separations examined in this volume—as well as other types of separations not included here—may produce similar effects on families and children, comparative research is needed to illuminate the potentially unique processes through which various types of separation yield similar or different outcomes for children and families.

Theoretical Frameworks

Future research should continue to apply theory and conceptual frameworks to better understand the effects of person and contextual factors and moderators and mediating processes on family and child outcomes in parent-child separation. Frameworks such as the ecological and family systems perspectives consider the larger institutional and social structures in which parent-child separation is nested (Paley et al., 2013). Wadsworth et al. (Chap. 7) applied the ecological framework to better understand the role of contextual factors in the effects of parent-child separation due to military deployment. Similarly, a family systems perspective views the family as an interrelated system where the outcome of one member affects another (Cox & Paley, 1997). A family systems perspective directs attention to moderators and mediators that reduce the risk of adverse outcomes for families and children that may stem from separation (Fairbank et al., Chap. 8; Wadsworth et al., Chap. 7). The family stress model, which holds that family transitions affect children through mediating variables such as parents' mental health and parenting styles (Barnett, 2008; Conger et al., 2002; Elder et al., 1986), has also proven useful in efforts to better understand mediators that link separation to child and family outcomes: Gewirtz and Simenec (Chap. 9) applied the family stress model to assess the effects of military deployment on parenting, and in turn on children's adjustment. Additionally, these investigators applied the social interaction learning model (Forgatch & Gewirtz, 2017) to better understand how parents adjust and modify their parenting skills in the context of these separations. Future research should continue applying these and other theories to illuminate the roles of person and context characteristics and family processes in the outcomes of parent-child separations.

Research Designs and Methods

We also endorse the call by the authors of this volume for new approaches to data collection that would provide new insights on parent-child separation effects. Longitudinal research designs, for example, allow researchers to track the outcomes of parent-child separations by controlling for pre-separation factors, including child well-being, and also allow observation throughout the separation process. Along these lines, Copp (Chap. 6) contends that separation should not be studied as an isolated event, but as a process that unfolds over time. Additionally, Wadsworth et al. (Chap. 7) argue that much prior work has focused on current or recent military deployments, and much less is known about the long-term consequences: Longitudinal data would allow researchers to study separation as a process and identify its long-term effects. Researchers who collect intensive longitudinal data (i.e., high-frequency measurement data), such as via ecological momentary assessments, daily diaries, or devices such as sleep actigraphy, may also shed new light on parent-child separation effects. For example, Gewirtz and Simenec (Chap. 9) used physiological and observational data to test the effectiveness of family interventions. Mixed-methods approaches also hold value. For instance, several chapters showcase the utility of qualitative data collected via interviews (Cardoso et al., Chap. 3; Dreby, Chap. 2). Qualitative data may allow researchers to capture individuals' own voices, valuable in themselves but also useful in developing questionnaires and surveys. Additionally, researchers may collect observational data to provide more objective accounts of child and family functioning as compared to self-reports (Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9).

These various types of data can provide researchers with opportunities to ask new types of research questions using different research methods. Fixed-effects models may provide valuable insights on separation processes and their correlates because they allow for examining both between- and within-person variation. Using a repeated measures design, one could learn whether children who have more contact with an incarcerated parent have better mental health than those who have less contact—but also whether, on days when a child has more contact with his or her incarcerated parent, he or she has better mental health than he or she usually does (i.e., compared to his or her cross-time average.). Additionally, as Amuedo-Dorantes et al. (Chap. 1) highlighted, family and child outcomes may be affected by public policies. Longitudinal administrative data (i.e., data collected by government agencies and offices such as child welfare and labor statistics) may allow researchers to better understand the effects of policy on family and child outcomes using approaches such as regression discontinuity designs.

Intervention: Family-Based Intervention

Many of the chapters in this volume highlighted the importance of family-based interventions for families affected by parent-child separations, and we concur that more work is needed in this realm as well. Gewirtz and Simenec (Chap. 9) highlighted how parenting intervention programs might improve mental health and reduce substance abuse for parents *and* children affected by military deployment. Their research also revealed how the effectiveness of interventions might be evaluated through monitoring physiological indicators: By monitoring vagal suppression, they were better able to detect their intervention's effect on parenting (Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9). Poehlmann-Tynan (Chap. 4) described innovative modes of intervention including children's TV programming and parent-child visitation days that may improve outcomes for children and families with incarcerated parents. Future interventions should continue to test novel approaches for aiding children and families—including ways of addressing recruitment and retention (Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9).

Policy: Focusing on Children and Family Well-Being

Finally, the research described throughout this volume has implication for policies aimed at mitigating risk and promoting the well-being of children and families facing parental separation. Although the chapters focus on particular contexts of separation (i.e., migration, military deployment, or incarceration), lessons learned in one setting may be applicable to others. For instance, the development of safe zones that are free from the threat of further separation or disruption in children's lives may improve children's educational outcomes and their overall well-being (Amudeo-Dorantes, Chap. 1). Additionally, policies aimed at decreasing unnecessary parental detainment would limit parent-child separations and their negative sequelae (Dreby, Chap. 2). When separation does occur, as in the case of parental incarceration or immigration-related detainments, policies and practices that support child visitation should be developed (Poehlmann-Tynan, Chap. 4). Lastly, policies aimed at providing mental and physical health services for all children who are experiencing parental separations may serve to reduce the risks of short- and long-term problem outcomes and promote their positive behavior, health, and development (Fairbank et al., Chap. 8; Gewirtz & Simenec, Chap. 9; Wadsworth et al., Chap. 7).

Conclusion

Together, the chapters in this volume provide unique and in-depth insights into the circumstances under which and the processes through which parent-child separation—due to three very different institutional contexts—may have impacts on children and their families. This research makes it clear that each kind of separation involves unique challenges—but also that parent-child separation, no matter the context, can have significant implications for child and family well-being. The larger structures in which families are embedded and the family system itself shape how children and families respond during these experiences; research should continue to consider the macro and micro processes involved in these family transitions. This broad and multifaceted area of research presents many exciting avenues for research by family scholars. Continued study may advance family theory as well as translation of research evidence into effective interventions and policies.

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