We serve, too.

A Toolkit about Military Kids

NATIONAL
MILITARY FAMILY
ASSOCIATION

Together we're stronger

INTRODUCTION

A recent RAND study commissioned by the National Military Family Association explored how children from military families are faring with the wartime deployments of their parents. RAND surveyed 1,500 youth (applicants to the Association's *Operation Purple*® summer camps ranging in age from 11 to 17), as well as each subject's non-deployed parent at home.

The study found that rates of anxiety among military children—as well as emotional and behavioral difficulties—are higher than the national averages, and that longer periods of parental deployment exacerbated these challenges.

The study also found that the majority of military families are healthy and coping well with the challenges of deployment. And for those youth and families struggling, the study offers hope and cites specific areas of opportunity to strengthen military families.

Ten Things Military Kids Want You to Know

Each summer, the National Military Family Association's *Operation Purple* program provides a free week of camp for thousands of military youth who have a parent serving in the Uniformed Services. We asked participants to tell us the best and hardest parts about military life in an activity called the Top Ten List. The messages in this toolkit summarize what they've said over the past few years.

This toolkit, coming from the perspective of elementary school-age military children 6 to 11 years old, is the second in a series from the National Military Family Association to give the people in military kids' lives—teachers, school counselors, coaches, community leaders, religious leaders, neighbors, family friends, or relatives—a way to help them manage stress and affirm the positive aspects of military life.

What we hear repeatedly from military kids is that they need people in their community to know what they're going through.

The best thing you can do for a military kid is know who they are and be there when they need to talk to someone.

1. PRIDE

"I hope to one day be as great as him."

If you've ever seen the joy on a child's face when a mom or dad returns from deployment, you've seen a glimpse of how some military kids see their parents—they are heroes! Even though most children aren't mature enough to grasp abstract concepts like patriotism, nearly every *Operation Purple*® "Top Ten" list included a statement of pride about their parent's service.

But, in communities where there aren't many other military families, children may feel alone or may be hesitant to say their mom or dad is in the military because it singles them out as different. Reinforce a child's pride in their parent and strengthen the bond between the child and parent with these strategies:

- Host a "hero day" highlighting service members, police, firefighters, nurses, and other people whose job is to help others.
- Create a board in your classroom, locker room, or house of worship recognizing service members.
- Invite the military parent to your organization for Veterans Day or Memorial Day to talk about the Armed Forces.
- Encourage the students you work with to participate in a community service event in your neighborhood.
- Display the member's Service symbol on the child's classroom door to show classes with students having a parent in the military. s and use it as a guide to support military teens you know.
- Tell them you're proud of them. Sometimes they just need to hear that they're doing a great job for their family and their country.

Resources:

Family of the Year Award—nominate an extraordinary military family for a cash prize and trip to Washington D.C. Visit *www.MilitaryFamily.org* for more information.

"My Hero: Military Kids Write About Their Moms and Dads," by Allen Appel and Mark Rothmiller— Armed Services YMCA youth tell heartwarming and candid stories about their military parents. Visit *www.asymca.org* for more information.

We're proud of our parents.

2. SERVICE

"My dad serves in the military and we do, too."

For most children, turning ten means more than just entry into double digits in a military family. It's also when a military child typically gets a personal ID card. Yup, their very own computer distorted photo, just like dad or mom. Even though they aren't "in" the military, kids serve in many ways. They send care packages to their military parent when they are deployed. They take on new responsibilities when situations change in their families. They grow up with a sense of community and service to country.

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have given military kids a greater understanding of their parent's job. Children at Ramstein Intermediate and Middle Schools in Germany asked to be in a club for children in 3rd through 8th grade called Kids4Kids. These children of deployed parents got to see what it was like to go through processing for deployment, from eating Meals Ready to Eat (MRE), to sleeping in a tent. Many kids at *Operation Purple*® camp said their favorite activity at camp was Military Day, which included watching Blackhawks whirl in for a landing and a Q&A with a military guest speaker. *Operation Purple* campers said the experience of a week at camp with other military kids going through a deployment reminded them that they, too, were part of the efforts supporting troops overseas. Use these strategies as an opportunity to reinforce the positive efforts that military kids make by supporting their parents—and by just being kids

- Celebrate the Month of the Military Child in April.
- Support legislation that provides new opportunities for military families. *www.militaryfamily.org/speak-up/policy-issues*
- Send them to an *Operation Purple* camp. *www.militaryfamily.org/operation-purple*
- Nominate kids for awards when they have made contributions to their community.
- Thank them! Sometimes they just need to hear their family is appreciated.

Resources:

National Military Family Association's Operation Purple Camps. Visit *www.MilitaryFamily.org* for more information.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America National Youth of the Year Program—BGCA members are recognized for overcoming obstacles and making outstanding contributions to their school, family and community. Visit *www.bgca.org/YOY* for more information.

We serve, too.

3. COMMUNITY

"Being a part of a military family is a lot of hard work. There's more responsibility and there's a very hard sacrifice to make. Your whole life changes."

Less than ten percent of the 1.2 million children of service members attend Department of Defense schools. They play sports, join clubs, and attend school in your neighborhood. Also, there are more than 700,000 National Guard and Reserve kids who might never live on or near a military installation. Because military families often live far from extended relatives, they look within their community for friendship and support, especially during long deployments, so it's a good idea to know who they are. Of course, military kids are like any other kids—they don't know that much about what mom or dad does for work. Here are a few ways to get to know your military neighbors, without using a spotlight:

- Include questions about military demographics in your organization's sign-up forms or registration papers. Track this for informational purposes and for documentation when you are eligible for programs that subsidize heavily military-affected areas.
- Create a military resource center in your organization and discover who taps into it. Then, get to know them.
- Post a clock in the room that displays military time. It will start a discussion; learn who knows who might be able to explain it to the room.
- Celebrate military-themed seasons. April is the Month of the Military Child. May hosts National Military Appreciation Month; November is Military Family Month. Then there's Veteran's Day, Memorial Day... you get the idea.
- Contact the Military Family Research Institute for a kit to create a Hero Tree. This resource for librarians includes educational tools and guidance on how they can recognize their local service members in the local community.

We're your neighbors.

Resources:

Military Impacted Schools Association (MISA) is a national organization of school superintendents that works on funding (Impact Aid), legislation, partnerships and programs for military families on the move. Visit *www.militarystudent.org* for more information.

Military Brats and Other Global Nomads: Growing Up in Organization Families by Morten Ender, sociology professor at West Point Military Academy is a collection of research about military families with perspectives from adults who grew up in the Service.

4. DIVERSITY

"You move a lot so you have to rely on family."

With more than 500 U.S. military installations around the world, some active duty families get to see a lot of America and even a few countries overseas. Kids may have lived in popular locations like Germany, Japan, Korea, England, or Italy for several years at a time. They may have even picked up a second language. In a 2007 report on Army families, 81 percent of adults who were raised in the Army reported speaking one or two languages other than English while growing up.

The Armed Forces are generally recognized as a diverse force. Between moving around and experiencing the diverse nature of the Service, military kids learn how to fit in just about anywhere and make new friends fast.

Dealing with the mobility of military life can be tough. But Operation Purple® kids saw the upside—vacations in between PCS's (permanent change of stations), international travel, and cool gifts from mom or dad's unaccompanied tours. No matter the Service, military kids can embrace the positive parts of change. What an incredible life lesson to learn so young! Help them keep that perspective with these strategies:

- Share your story about a new job, new school, or new friends. They'll see how you handled it and maybe share their experiences, too.
- Engage military kids as classroom resources. They can provide real insight to living in other towns and countries.
- Military kids are used to making new friends. Tap into the strengths they've developed meeting new people. Maybe they can help other new kids get oriented to the area or serve on diversity councils at school.
- Talk about personal strengths. Teach them ways to reach for those strengths during a big change in their life.

Resources:

Military Child Initiative "Building Resilient Kids" web-based course offered by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Johns Hopkins Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships. Visit *www.jhsph.edu/mci/training_course* for more information.

Positive Psychology—Geared for older children and adults, this site has helpful information on learning to use personal strengths to deal with life's challenges. Visit *www.authentichappiness.org* for more information.

We see lots of new places and faces.

5. SEPARATION

"I can't wait for my dad to come home from his deployment. It's going to be the best day ever."

Operation Purple® campers said deployments were one of the toughest parts about being a kid in a military family. A deployment is moving a person or a military unit from the United States to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission. This can mean anything from six months on a ship to a year in combat.

Families typically go through three phases during this time: 1) getting ready to deploy; 2) spending the time apart during the deployment; and 3) reuniting and reintegrating with the service member on their return.

During the deployment, service members may come home on a break known as R&R (Rest and Relaxation). This break can be very hard on children, since saying goodbye for a second time can be more difficult than the first.

Each phase has unique stressors, but *Operation Purple* campers were particularly concerned about the reuniting or reintegrating phase. Research shows that older children and girls have more challenges reuniting with the parent. Preschoolers may feel scared or angry while school-age kids might crave attention. Reunion or reintegration is a process that occurs over several months, not just a single day or couple weeks. Family structure and roles must be renegotiated with the returning member. Furthermore, reserve component families also face the service member's adjustment returning to a civilian job.

With the right support, these families can get through this long experience and become closer and stronger. Here are some things you can do:

- Connect with the non-deployed parent. Much of the child's well-being during deployment is based on the at-home caregiver's mental health. Children whose parent has poorer mental health may experience more emotional difficulties and more challenges with academic engagement. By reaching out to the at-home parent, you will be able to identify the areas in which you can provide support.
- Be sure the school counselor knows the dates of the parent's departure, R&R, and return from deployment. Plan for the scheduling of tests and accommodate school attendance around these days, if possible. Work with your school district to develop a policy on handling these events.
- Use the experience as an educational opportunity. Talking about where in the world the parent is deployed is a great geography lesson.
- Help young children grasp the concept of time by creating a deployment time capsule filled with items such as a string that represents the child's height when the parent leaves, a tracing of a hand or foot, a favorite toy or song. Open the capsule at the end of the deployment to see how much has changed.
- Offer to help with carpools to sports and school activities to help the parent at home manage their kids' schedules while the service member is gone.

Our parents deploy.

Resources:

Military Child Education Coalition—resources and training for parents and educators of mobile military children. Visit *www.militarychild.org* for more information.

Zero to Three—Resources for the youngest military children. Visit *www.zerotothree.org* for more information.

6. TRADITION

"In my family it's a tradition to be in the military."

What's the first thing you think of when you hear the word military? Uniforms? Guns? War? Defending our Nation is the ultimate calling of our troops, but there are many other facets of life for a military family member beyond war. The military is a rich culture of tradition, honor, and sacrifice—as well as family, fun, and a lot of volunteerism! Our campers said that stereotypes about the Service made deployments even tougher. They feel teachers and classmates sometimes assume what their families' political beliefs are and don't understand them during this time. They feel alone. That's important to know because most military kids live in the community and are not surrounded by other kids who know what their life is like. National Guard and Reserve children may be the only military child in a class or entire school. Negative associations with military life such as protests, judgments on the war or service members, in general, are very disturbing for children. Imagine how much more so if the negative actions are expressed or perceived to be held by a trusted figure in their life such as a teacher or mentor?

Here are some other ways to get to know more about the military culture and dispel a few myths along the way:

- Take a field trip to a military installation.
- Monitor how children are exposed to media coverage of the military. For them, it's not just the news. It's personal and it's complicated.
- Invite a service member to talk about his or her job. There are doctors, mechanics, engineers, computer specialists, and many other types of professionals serving in the military. The military is just one place to apply a range of skills.
- Talk with your organization leaders regarding how you will handle discussions with children about current combat operations, particularly if there is a military child in your group.
- Volunteer with a military charity. You'll get a new perspective working with and for military families.
- Talk with your children about what culture means and why it's important to any community.

Resources:

Pick up a *Military Times* paper to read news written just for service members and their families. Visit *www.militarytimes.com* for more information.

Visit the Department of Defense's Military Homefront website, *www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil*, for reports and military family demographics.

This is normal life for us.

7. RECOGNITION

"There are good things like getting to go on base, fun activities, and good advantages."

Military kids have made the connection between their parent's service and the benefits that come with it. They also notice public support of the military as well. They named programs like *Operation Purple®* camp, installation privileges, and gifts from their parent's travels as some of the best parts about being a military family.

Some of the benefits in the military they talked about indicated that little ears are doing a lot of listening to the grown-ups in their lives. Their "Top Ten" lists included benefits such as fully-funded health care, a guaranteed job, and the commissary (the military's version of your local supermarket)! Indeed, military families don't always feel the effects of economic fluctuations in the same way some civilian families do. Overall, job security is high in the military and, at the present time, there are no premiums paid for military-provided health care when service members are on active duty. Military families also receive a housing allowance to apply toward housing costs. Department of Defense Schools rank high on many school quality ratings. Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) activities at military installations provide everything from on-base bowling, supervised pools, or even skate parks, which can make even the most remote military installation feel like home.

Kids definitely appreciate public support of the military. Here are some other ways to give back to the military community and help kids learn how to pay it forward:

- Fly your flag, wear a pin, or display a support our troops ribbon. They'll notice!
- Write thank you notes, as a group, to deployed troops.
- Have discussions about the role of public service, whether serving in uniform or participating in a neighborhood cleanup.
- Donate to a military charity in honor of a military family you know.
- Support initiatives that provide better education, health care, and recreational activities for military families.

We like being recognized.

Resources:

U.S. Department of Defense Community Relations Website—A Department of Defense
website that provides opportunities for citizens to show support for service members.
Visit *www.ourmilitary.mil* for more ways to support military families.

Let's Say Thanks—Pick and send a free postcard with a thank you message to troops overseas. Visit *www.letssaythanks.com* to send a card today!

8. LOSS

"It's terrible without my dad. And it would be really hard if he gets hurt or shot or even killed."

The absence of a parent can affect a child's development and basic sense of trust according to experts. Between moving, deployments, and long hours, military parents spend a lot of time away from their kids. In 2003, service members reported being away from home on average two months out of the year for reasons other than deployment to operations.[1] Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have increased these separations; nearly 900,000 troops with children have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. A recent Department of Defense report said children between ages of 6 and 13 were most affected by these deployments.

There is another, more permanent, loss that looms over military families: the injury or death of a parent. Tens of thousands of service members have been injured in Iraq or Afghanistan and thousands have given their lives. And more are affected by mental health challenges and return from war changed. Nearly 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are believed to be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.[2]

When a parent is injured, ill, or even away for long periods of time, the family's roles, routines and sense of safety can be dramatically disrupted. Community support plays a large part in helping families cope through these losses. Every family and every situation is unique, but here are some basic steps you can take to help:

- Take the course "Living in the New Normal," offered by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), which teaches educators and other adults in military children's lives how to help children handle trauma and loss.
- Educate your community leaders about the needs of a combat-injured family. Your local Service's Wounded Warrior program may have a representative who can conduct a workshop or provide more information.
- Become acquainted with Service support programs for severely wounded service members: Safe Harbor provides non-medical care to severely wounded, ill, or injured Navy and Coast Guard personnel. The Army Wounded Warrior program (AW2) serves Soldiers. Support for Marines is found at the Marines Wounded Warrior Regiment. Airmen can find resources at Air Force Wounded Warrior (AFW2).

We experience separation, changes, and sadness.

[1] *Effects of Deployments on Spouses of Military Personnel* by Bogdan Savych. Published August 2008.

[2] Department of Defense. *www.defense.gov/releases*, pulled July 8, 2010.

Resources:

Sesame Workshop. In this primetime special, Sesame Workshop presents personal stories about coping with the death of a parent. Visit *www.sesameworkshop.org/grief* to watch the video.

Military OneSource—A toll-free number and website to answer just about every question a service member, family member or concerned citizen may have about the military and its resource. Visit *www.militaryonesource.com* or call 800.342.9647.

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9. TRANSITION

"I have to make a bunch of new friends every time I move."

Campers said they like making new friends, but they feel as if they're always the "new kid." Military children get new schools, new friends, and new homes about every three years, while the average American family moves once every five years.[1] Most military children will attend six to nine different schools from grades K-12.[2] They move around the United States and abroad. That's a lot of goodbyes! *Operation Purple®* kids said that, next to deployments, moving was the toughest thing about being a kid in a military family.

Moving and parental absences have been shown to have a negative impact on military children's test scores, particularly in single parent families and for younger children. The familiar routine of school is often an anchor for a child who moves a lot, and because military families don't usually live near extended relatives, they rely on each other and community resources. Creating a safe welcoming environment helps military kids make this transition a little bit easier and really make a difference:

- Keep on hand a "welcome wagon" packet of information that you would normally give to new students at the beginning of the year. Contacts for local resources like the post office, library, or popular parks help new families get acclimated to the area quickly.
- Reserve slots in classes, athletics, and clubs for military students who arrive later in the year. Give these students the chance to thrive in the areas that are most appropriate for them, not just the ones available in the middle of the term.
- Create a parent-buddy system for newly relocated families. Encourage members to hold PTA offices. Having a parent get involved in school serves as a good example for a child to do the same.
- Form a traveler's club. Kids of all ages can learn about other states and countries while sharing their travel adventures.
- As a gift to a child who is moving, create a photo album of their friends, teachers, coaches, school building, and other popular community locations for them to take with them on their move. Send them off with a party so they can say goodbye to their friends.
- Check to see if the state is a member of the Interstate Compact, if not petition legislators.

[1] United States 2000 Census. *www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html*
[2] *Military Brats and Other Global Nomads: Growing Up in Organization Families* by Morten Ender, sociology professor at West Point Military Academy. A collection of research about military families with perspectives from adults who grew up in the service.

Resources:

Military K-12 Partnership—School Liaison Officers network, educate, and work in partnership with local schools to provide caring adults to enhance the education experience. Visit *http://militaryk12partners.dodea.edu* for more information.

National Network of Partnership Schools—NNPS provides research-based guidance on engaging parents, schools, and community leaders to create student success in schools. Visit *www.partnershipschools.org* for more information.

We feel like we're always the "new kid."

10. WORRY

"Thinking about my mom or dad passing away and dying makes me scared."

When's mom leaving? Is dad going to get hurt in Iraq? Will I get to finish school here? There are a lot of concerns running through their little minds, according to our campers. They said they worry about their parent when he or she is deployed, they feel anxious about moving, and they wonder if parents will miss important events when they are called away to duty. All of this makes for a lot of uncertainty that leads to stress. It's important to remember that these variables are constant in an active duty family's life. However, National Guard and Reserve families may have these changes thrust upon them all at once when a service member is deployed. For both groups, the more concerns, the greater the impact on the child.

In the 1970s, researchers raised the curtain on these issues. Irritability, depression, and aggression were connected to children associated with military life. Even today, 30% of the respondents had elevated anxiety symptoms in comparison to civilian clinical samples. But anxiety also decreased with the child's age. More recently, researchers have also looked at how military kids thrive despite the military lifestyle factors. Adults who grew up as military kids say they have mostly positive memories of their experiences. *Operation Purple®* campers said they see the bright side of their unique lifestyle, too.

So which is it? How can military life be worrisome and at the same time build character? Research on resilience shows that facing adverse situations builds strength in children who are able to successfully adapt. What strategies are working to help kids cope with their concerns? Again, it comes down to parents and strong connections with other caring adults. Here are some ideas to rally your community around the caregiver and kids:

- Help children understand that they're not alone in their journeys—foreign service workers, missionaries, truck drivers, airline pilots, fishermen, and even business consultants all have unique lifestyles that require the family to endure separations, and in some cases, danger.
- Educate parents on basic child development so they know what information is age-appropriate for their children and what a normal stress reaction is, and when it's time to enlist some help. Take stock of your community resources and make sure parents have a list of resources they can contact, if the need occurs.
- Encourage military children to practice the "Three Blessings" exercise. Write down three things that went right that day and why. Check back in a week. It helps kids find the joy in their life and identify their character strengths.
- Host a club where military kids can feel at home and talk about their unique experiences. Provide information about Operation Purple camps where they can really bond with their military peers. Group associations can help people decrease stress.

Resources:

"Understanding and Promoting Resiliency" Military Family Research Institute—a valuable overview of some studies of resiliency, what it means and how people become resilient, with specific discussions on how the topic is applied in military families. Visit *www.mfri.purdue.edu* for more information.

"The Seven C's of Resilience," an American Academy of Pediatrics excerpt on helping children cope with life. Visit *www.aap.org/stress/childcopehome.htm* for more information.

We're scared something might happen to our parents.

About the National Military Family Association

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit organization committed to strengthening and protecting the families of the men and women currently serving, retired, wounded, or fallen. We provide families of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA with information, work to get them the benefits they deserve, and offer programs that improve their lives.

For more information about this and other military family issues, visit the National Military Family Association's website (*www.MilitaryFamily.org*).

Helpful resources

Department of Defense sponsored site with information for teens, parents, and educators: *www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil*

Military OneSource is a comprehensive, free resource and referral service for military families providing information for everything from moving, to counseling, to car repair services: *www.militaryonesource.com*

American Academy of Pediatrics site dedicated to the support of military children and adolescence: *www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html*

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