

Students of Military Families and Mental Health Cultural Competency



Background and Major Concerns



Research indicates that military families are highly resilient, and often able to adequately cope even with the extreme stresses of military life. However, students of military parents do face unique challenges and require additional support and compassion. Major problems can include missing school, not completing homework, and having a disengaged non-deployed parent. Students of military families move frequently, often every 2-3 years, and may live for extended periods on foreign

bases.¹ When a parent is deployed, youth experience significantly higher rates of anxiety, more behavioral problems, and lower academic performance.³ Some research suggests that these kinds of problems are even worse for active-duty Reservists and National Guard members and their families, because they are isolated from military communities and the supports typically available to service members.²

Deployments may be considered in three phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. Pre-deployment is after a service member has received notification that they will deploy, but before they have left; the period may last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks, and causes shock and anxiety in families. Deployment typically lasts 6-12 months or more, depending on the military branch. Youth may need to take on increased responsibilities and family roles will shift during this time. During deployment, youth experience lack of stability, loss of control, difficulty sleeping, and often an extreme fear for not just their parent's physical safety but for their own. Research suggests that although these symptoms tend to subside after an initial phase, longer deployments cause worse reactions. Post-deployment brings intense relief and joy, but also a period of readjustment as families transition away from the "new normal" routine they had established during deployment. Youth may struggle to reconnect with homecoming parents, or have fears that their parents will no longer remember or love them. Family counseling and/or interventions may be necessary, especially given the prevalence of PTSD and traumatic head injuries from military service.^{3,4}

Mental health issues may also arise in relation to the non-deployed parent. Maltreatment and child neglect rates are higher when one parent is deployed. Additionally, the student may become a confidant, support, or even caregiver for the non-deployed parent if that parent lacks effective

coping mechanisms to deal with the service member's absence. This situation can be highly upsetting or stressful for the youth.³

Supported Approaches for Schools and Educators

- Because military families move often, it is especially important that schools thoroughly document any mental health concerns or meetings. If distress symptoms are severe, or they indicate that the youth may harm themselves or others, an immediate health services referral and parental notification is strongly recommended. Acute distress symptoms may include hallucinations, severe depression or disconnection from others, self-injury or violence toward others, and unfocused agitation.



If symptoms are moderate or mild but last for more than 6 weeks, parental notification and a health services referral is also strongly recommended. Distress symptoms may include:

- Frequent crying, appearing depressed or intensely sad
- Weight gain or loss
- Difficulty concentrating or appearing withdrawn
- Signs of possible substance use
- Self-injury, violence toward others, focusing on violent imagery

A list of distress symptoms can be found on page 5 of the "[Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf)" (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf>).

- Many teachers and schools express frustration about not knowing which students are from military families or when deployments may take place. Schools may ask if there is a military parent and/or an upcoming expected deployment in annual parent surveys (but responses to military-related questions should be voluntary).¹
- Military youth may miss extra school days or need homework extensions, especially for deployment homecomings, and researchers suggest compassionate lenience. However, so that the youth does not fall behind in school, it is also important to hold him or her accountable for schoolwork. It is useful to develop compassionate, structured accommodation plans in partnership with the youth's caregiver(s).³
- For chaotic situations like emergency drills, it is compassionate practice to give military students advanced warning of timing, what to expect, and how to react. Additionally, consider providing them with advanced preparation for any schedule changes (including testing days), since lack of structure can create anxiety for youth.³
- Schools should become familiar with mental health resources available to service members' families, and help provide them with this information. For instance, MilitaryOneSource.mil

offers non-medical counseling, hotlines, and other confidential help services; UCLA's [FOCUS project](http://www.focusproject.org/focus-world-intro) (<http://www.focusproject.org/focus-world-intro>) provides online resiliency and family communication training (face-to-face in some areas). An annotated list of mental health services and phone numbers can be found on the [Defense Centers of Excellence site](http://www.dcoe.mil/Families/Locating_Health_Care.aspx) (http://www.dcoe.mil/Families/Locating_Health_Care.aspx), which also has outreach services like [live chat and hotlines](http://www.dcoe.mil/Families/Help.aspx) (<http://www.dcoe.mil/Families/Help.aspx>).

- During a parent's deployment, encourage staff to talk with the student about it if the youth is comfortable with these conversations. Discussions can include where the parent is deployed and what role(s) they serve. "Lunch bunch" meetings with a school counselor or other administrator can help students open up and connect with other students who are in the same situation.³
- In the classroom, educators should address war and military events only as they pertain to lesson plans (such as educational discussion of current events). Focus on the goals of a particular military strategy, not on the danger or potential for harm to soldiers. Avoid gruesome or traumatizing details, and limit media exposure in the classroom. When appropriate, consider offering alternate assignments so that students are not forced to dwell on frightening or disturbing material.⁴
- School staff should maintain objectivity whenever discussing wars or the military, and respond in a calm and caring manner when these topics are broached. Staff should be cautioned against sharing personal negative opinions, whether formally (in class discussions or lecture) or informally (in conversation to or around students). It can be extremely stressful for children of military parents to perceive that their teachers or peers disapprove of their parent's service.^{3,4}
- Staff should acknowledge and validate the youth's feelings during parent deployment as normal and understandable reactions; they should reiterate that the youth is safe and that care is being taken of their parent's safety as well.⁴
- Military culture strongly emphasizes self-sacrifice, and this value is often ingrained in the children of military parents (characterized by sayings such as, "when one family member serves, all serve"). Many youth who have a deployed parent take on extra or adult responsibilities, including extra housework, part-time jobs, and sibling care. Educators and counselors should praise these youth for their sacrifice. However, it is also important to pay attention for signs of parental neglect, and to encourage these students to hold reasonable and self-compassionate expectations for themselves.⁵
- Self-efficacy is also a major component of military culture. Military families may be more receptive to mental health care when it involves equipping them with the tools and resources they need to help themselves, rather than a top-down approach.⁵
- Educators and counselors can appeal to military families' teamwork mindset to overcome resistance these families might have toward counseling services. It is important to build bridges with these parents to work together on improving their children's academic, mental, and social

health (such as by co-creating a team success plan).⁵

- If youth from military families exhibit anger or related behavioral problems, leadership development can help them manage their feelings while tapping into their family's cultural values. Encourage military students to get involved in school activities, and waive or help with enrollment and tryout requirements. Schools can hand out new student packets that include activity information, or even create social clubs for military students.^{3,5}
- Learning common military terms and acronyms is a frequently recommended aspect of cultural competence with this group. See this useful [VA guide](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/military_culture.asp#sthash.Ktl5BFcJ.dpbs) (http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/military_culture.asp#sthash.Ktl5BFcJ.dpbs).

Resources, Training, and Guides

- The Center for Deployment Psychology has a [free online course on military cultural competence](http://deploymentpsych.org/online-courses/military-culture) (<http://deploymentpsych.org/online-courses/military-culture>). It is intended for mental health professionals, but provides a comprehensive introduction to military life and language and potential mental health concerns.
- The American Association for School Administrators (AASA) has published a [military student toolkit](http://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Toolkits/Other_Toolkits/AASA_Supporting_the_Military_Child_Toolkit/MilitaryChildToolkitComplete.pdf) (http://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Toolkits/Other_Toolkits/AASA_Supporting_the_Military_Child_Toolkit/MilitaryChildToolkitComplete.pdf) for schools. The toolkit is not specific to mental health, but it does include quick tips on how schools and teachers can support military families, what sorts of resources are available to military families (include free tutoring), organizations and school Impact Aid devoted to military families, and more.
- All 50 states have signed the Interstate Compact on Education for Military Children. The Compact guarantees smooth and easy transitions between school districts and states for youth with military families (including children of Reserves/National Guard members), as well as other rights to ensure they graduate on time. Schools do not always know about the Compact, however, particularly if they do not have a large military population. Military OneSource, a comprehensive Department of Defense program to assist active duty service members and their families (including counseling and education services), has an easy-to-read [guide to the Compact](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/k-12-and-college-education?content_id=267430) (http://www.militaryonesource.mil/k-12-and-college-education?content_id=267430). See also the Military Interstate and the Compact Commission's [site here](http://mic3.net/) (<http://mic3.net/>). The AASA toolkit (above) also thoroughly explains the Compact.
- The [National Military Family Association](http://www.militaryfamily.org/) (<http://www.militaryfamily.org/>) is a nonprofit organization that provides support and advocacy, and helped draft the Interstate Compact on



Education for Military Children. The website and MyMilitaryLife app include information for military spouses and parents on topics such as education, tuition, deployment, and resources for military family members with special needs.

- [Teachers College Press has guides about supporting students of military families](http://www.tcpres.com/militaryfamilies.html) (<http://www.tcpres.com/militaryfamilies.html>). There are four books for purchase, targeting administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents (also for sale as a 4-book set). Royalties go to educational activities for youth from military families.
- [Military Child Education Coalition](http://www.militarychild.org/) (<http://www.militarychild.org/>) offers a variety of online and face-to-face [training courses](http://www.militarychild.org/trainings-and-events1) (<http://www.militarychild.org/trainings-and-events1>).
- MilitaryKidsConnect has a [section for educators](http://militarykidsconnect.dcoe.mil/educators) (<http://militarykidsconnect.dcoe.mil/educators>). It provides tips on working with military students, common problems youth face during deployment, a beginner’s guide to military culture, lesson plans, and more.
- The [U.S. Army Deployment Support Handbook](http://www.myarmyonesource.com/cmsresources/Army%20OneSource/Media/PDFs/Family%20Programs%20and%20Services/Family%20Programs/Deployment%20Readiness/Operation%20READY/DEPLOY_SPPT_HBOOK_CHILD_YOUTH.pdf) (http://www.myarmyonesource.com/cmsresources/Army%20OneSource/Media/PDFs/Family%20Programs%20and%20Services/Family%20Programs/Deployment%20Readiness/Operation%20READY/DEPLOY_SPPT_HBOOK_CHILD_YOUTH.pdf) is written specifically for military parents and their spouses, but gives a thorough explanation of deployment stresses and symptoms in each age group from infancy through the teenage years (as well as family strategies for coping).
- Kognito [Family of Heroes](http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=312) (<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=312>) is an online role-playing situation designed for families of servicemembers to respond effectively to their returning family member.
- [HomeBaseProgram.org](http://www.stayingstrong.org/educators) has a 26-minute documentary video, “[Staying Strong: How Schools Build Resilience in Military Families](http://www.stayingstrong.org/educators)” (<http://www.stayingstrong.org/educators>) to be used in conjunction with their [educator toolkit](http://www.homebaseprogram.org/~media/Files/community%20education/toolkits/Educator%20Toolkit%20FINAL.pdf) (<http://www.homebaseprogram.org/~media/Files/community%20education/toolkits/Educator%20Toolkit%20FINAL.pdf>). Both of these tools are aimed at increasing cultural competence and are freely available online.

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