

An estimated 1.75 million U.S. children have one or more parents serving in the military. Although many of these children live in areas with a heavy concentration of military members, many National Guard, selected reserve and active duty families live in areas more isolated from the support and resources provided on military installations. Whether you work in an area near a military base or one far removed from a military presence, chances are you will encounter students whose parents serve in the military. Understanding and addressing the needs of military children and their families only serves to promote their welfare.

Research suggests military children are resilient and perform as well as their peers on academic indicators. However, military children do experience additional stressors that can affect their social/emotional and academic well-being. These stressors are most commonly associated with the military community's frequent relocations and separation from a military parent due to deployments or temporary duty elsewhere.

### **Military Children on the Move**

The average military family moves every two to three years. The Department of Defense Education Activities reports that military children whose parent remains in service for their entire education will change schools six to nine times during their K–12 educational career. To compound the frequency of moves, duty station relocations occur at varying times throughout the year – sometimes with little advance notice. Military families must prepare for an impending move, research the new duty station and community and often make decisions about where to live and what schools their children will attend without ever setting foot at that duty station. With each relocation, military children experience the loss of the familiar, coupled with the anticipation and anxiety of the unknown.

At each new school system, students must adjust to a new school culture, new friends and a new academic curriculum. School counselors can facilitate positive school transitions by helping families meaningfully connect to the school, peers and the community. School counselors should also understand legislation pertaining to military students and advocate for favorable policies minimizing academic disruptions.

Let's take a look at some practices and resources school counselors can use to help students and families connect to the school and promote positive school transitions for military children.

Include military family resources on the school website: Military families research prospective schools online. You can foster a welcoming school climate by including a special message on the school website and a list of area resources available to military families. Invite military families to contact you prior to transferring to the new school to connect with prospective families and personally answer any questions they may have about the school and community.

Develop a connection center: Some school systems have developed connection centers for incoming military families. These centers, which are often as simple as a bookshelf housed in the main office, welcome military families to the community. They offer brochures, handouts and materials about the community and school, provide an overview of the school culture and outline important school policies. Some connection centers offer a photo album showcasing staff and students, allowing military families to familiarize themselves with the school prior to the student's first day.

**Develop a peer helper program:** The No. 1 concern military children voice when transitioning to a new school is who they'll sit with at lunch. You can ease this fear by partnering new military students with a peer who can sit with them at lunch the first few days and show them around school. Whenever possible, connect students to the peers prior to students' first day, so they have a friendly and familiar face to help them upon arrival.

**Connect military families with the school:** Military families want to be a part of the school community. However, it can be challenging for families to understand how to fit into a new school culture, especially when transitioning mid-year. You can help incoming families feel part of the new school community by personally connecting them to their students' teachers, administrators, the PTA president and the volunteer coordinator. A personal introduction goes a long way toward facilitating a positive school/home relationship, which in turn helps military students have a smoother transition to the new school.

**Connect military families with other families:** Military families in a new community often don't know anyone local yet to be their student's emergency contact on all the paperwork they need to fill out for their children. As a school counselor, you know the families at your school. Connect an incoming military family with another empathetic family, who can answer any questions the new family may have, help the new family understand the community and who could possibly serve as an emergency contact. Also consider developing a military parent connection center or

hosting events specifically designed for military parents to connect with one another.

**Host a military kids club:** Many military students enjoy the camaraderie and support provided by sharing experiences with other military children. You can help connect military students to one another by offering a military kids club and inviting military students to hang out and participate in fun activities together. Find more information on the Military Child Education Coalition website at [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org).

**Understand military students' educational and extracurricular rights under the Interstate Compact:** All 50 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to support the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. This agreement among state governments helps eliminate barriers to military child education associated with frequent relocations. The compact provides guidance for schools on handling complex issues related to school transfers, including enrollment, placement, graduation differences between sending and receiving schools and extracurricular eligibility at the receiving school. Familiarize yourself with your state's provisions under the Interstate Compact, and advocate for equitable educational practices for military students. Learn more at [www.mic3.net](http://www.mic3.net).

### **Dealing With Deployments**

According to the 2017 Blue Star Families Survey, 40 percent of service members reported they had experienced six or more months of separation from their family in the previous 18 months. An astounding 32 percent of service members have spent four or more years separated from family since 9/11. Although frequent family separations have become common, they are still highly stressful and trying for the child and the family. Studies investigating the impact of deployment on children and families show children exhibit increased levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms during a parent's deployment. Reactions to parental deployment vary by child, by the child's developmental stage and by the parent's psychological adjustment. Commonly reported reactions to parental deployment include separation anxiety, mood changes, psychosomatic complaints, acting out behaviors, increased generalized anxiety, declining academic performance, withdrawal, depression and apathy. Fortunately, military children and families who feel supported and connected to one another and their community during deployment report better abilities to handle deployment-related stress.

You can help military students and families feel supported during deployments. Following are some suggestions and resources to promote coping skills, resiliency and family cohesiveness before, during and after a parent deploys.

**Know which families are military-connected.** Communicate with these families, and encourage them to inform the school when a parent is deployed or on temporary duty elsewhere.

Provide families with information and referral sources, whether requested or not. If families know about organizations able to help they will be more likely to seek help.

**Check in with the student and family regularly before, during and after deployment.** This will show the families you care and are there to support them.

**Advocate for the student and family.** There may be times when the student struggles with emotions, and this may result in behavior problems or academic difficulties. Don't excuse the student's behaviors, but do advocate for others to be compassionate toward the student.

**Validate students' feelings.** Students will present an array of fears about their parents' deployment. A simple rephrase of their concerns, such as, "You feel worried about your mom" shows a student you are listening and understand and is a more effective empathic response than falsely assuring a student, "I'm sure your mom is going to be fine."

**Ask questions about the deployed parent and the family;** do not shy away from emotionally charged topics. This shows genuine care and concern.

**Do not pity the students or families;** rather, recognize their strengths and resilience.

**Consult with colleagues.** It's important that school counselors, teachers and administrators collaborate with one another to address student concerns.

**Conduct individual, small-group and classroom counseling for students.** You can work with military students in

individual counseling, or form small groups, such as deployment clubs, coping skills groups, problem-solving groups and peer-helper programs to help students understand and deal with the stressors of deployment. For younger students, consider using flashcards, stories or feeling faces to help identify feelings, and teach them appropriate ways to express those feelings. There are numerous children's books on deployment that are excellent bibliocounseling resources. Additionally, you can teach or demonstrate relaxation techniques and promote positive self-talk. Provide older students with information about deployment, especially post-deployment reintegration, so their experiences may be somewhat normalized.

**Promote a climate that is responsive to the needs of the military family.** Students will feel more comfortable and willing to learn when they know they are cared for and supported. Schools might accomplish this by asking the student if they want to share about the parent's service and deployment, inviting the service member to school, honoring the service member, creating a bulletin board with deployment-related information and celebrating the Month of the Military Child in April of each year.

Consider leading staff professional development to help colleagues understand the stressors faced by military children and families.

Although these ideas can help you support military families during deployments and transitions, you don't need to operate in isolation. The military community has a wealth of resources available. See "Military Family Resources" to familiarize yourself with the available supports for military families, and refer families when appropriate. By being cognizant of the challenges military children face – and knowing how to help – you can make their time at your school a success.

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## **Military Family Resources**

### **Military and Family Support Centers/Fleet and Family Support Centers**

These centers, housed on military installations, are a one-stop center for programs and services promoting military and family readiness, retention and resilience. The centers offer counseling services, deployment support, financial management, relocation assistance, crisis response, career placement services and military family events.

### **School Liaison Officers**

These trained Department of Defense professionals assist families with school-related issues. School liaison officers develop close relationships with schools serving military children and often provide professional development for educators in military-impacted schools. Their primary responsibilities are to provide families with information about area schools and help them understand state education requirements. They also support the needs of students with IEPs and may even attend IEP meetings to support the family and advocate for the student.

### **Military and Family Life Counselors**

These licensed counselors provide free counseling services for military families. They frequently work alongside school counselors, often embedded within the schools, to provide in-depth counseling for students and families experiencing stressors related to their parent's military service.

### **Military One Source**

This online resource ([www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)) provides 24/7 support to military families for everything from nonmedical counseling to tax preparation services to scholarship information for eligible dependents.

### **Military Child Education Coalition**

This coalition ([www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)) promotes educational opportunities for military children affected by transitions, deployments and other military-related circumstances. The coalition also provides in-depth online and face-to-face trainings for K–12 educators who work with military children.

### **Exceptional Family Member Program**

This program offers a range of services to military families with special-needs children. Families must qualify to be eligible for the program's educational and mental health benefits.

**Tutor.com**

This website provides free online academic tutoring services for military children.

**Child and Youth Services/Child and Youth Programs**

These programs provide affordable childcare and aftercare options for military children.