



# How to Help FOR TEACHERS Military & Veteran Families

Lengthy and recurring deployments, as well as the adjustments associated with returning from them, challenge military members, their children, spouses and other loved ones. Military families routinely face frequent moves, parental absences, and the possibility of injury and bereavement. Together, all of these challenges increase the risk of social, emotional or behavioral problems among children at home and at school.<sup>1</sup> Children spend a large amount of time in classrooms, so teachers and others in the school environment play important roles in their lives. Teachers and educators who have a better understanding of the issues that military children face when a parent or guardian deploys can better address those needs and create classrooms that are welcoming and supportive.

More than 90 percent of the nation's 1.2 million military children attend civilian-operated public schools.<sup>2</sup> Schools provide child-centered opportunities to recognize and appreciate the positive aspects of growing up in a military family. The predictability and routine of the classroom helps to cushion the impact of stressors, and teachers are in an excellent position to identify and support these children's unique needs.



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## Did you know?

- » Students from military families may exhibit behaviors such as childhood depression, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and anxiety, which may impact learning.<sup>3</sup>
- » In Department of Defense schools, students appear to be functioning at relatively high levels despite risk factors associated with having a military parent. Students attending these schools score above the national average on standardized tests of achievement.<sup>2</sup>
- » Many issues may affect a child's academic progress, including problems with homework completion, attendance, and parental engagement, as well as stress related to household responsibilities or the parent's service-related problems.<sup>1</sup>
- » Recent research by the Military Child Education Coalition found that overall, military children show maturity beyond their years. Most importantly, they learn how family members care for each other and how, when responsibility is shared, families function well.<sup>4</sup>
- » Children's reactions to military life vary with their developmental stage, age, and preexisting issues. While many military children thrive, some school-age children may experience a decline in academic performance, and have mood changes or physical complaints.<sup>5</sup>
- » The Department of Education created the Specialized Training of Military Parents project, dedicated to serving military parents of children with special needs. Their National Parent Training and Information Center provides support and advice to military families with children who have special needs.<sup>6</sup>

# Practical Applications

## IF YOU ARE A CLASSROOM TEACHER

- Connect with service members prior to deployment. This way you can discuss communication strategies so parents can stay involved with their children's education.
- Watch for any deviations in children's normal behavior or academic performance, which may be an early indication of problems coping with a military-related separation.
- Provide support and share concerns with the parent or guardian.
- Use deployments as teaching opportunities. Subjects such as math, geography, government and science can be brought to life through discussion of deployments. Talking about this will help other children in the classroom appreciate and better understand the child's situation.<sup>7</sup>
- Be flexible in assigning homework. A student may have taken on additional family responsibilities or a parent may have less time to give assistance or undivided attention. This may be especially true if a parent is wounded, ill or injured and the caregiver parent is coping with challenges related to medical and daily living requirements.
- Invite service members to visit your class when they return from deployment. This can boost a military student's self-esteem and pride in his or her parent. Prior to the visit, caution your class to use sensitivity when asking questions about combat specifics.

## IF YOU ARE SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF

- If your school has a website, this is the perfect place for service members to access a school calendar, pictures and descriptions of special activities, and homework assignments.<sup>7</sup>



- Create a support group or “pride club” for military children. Regular activities with other children who are going through similar military family experiences can help a child cope.
- Provide coping skills to assist students in identifying emotions and expressing feelings appropriately.
- Allow time for in-service opportunities to educate staff about deployment issues and the effects on children's learning and engagement in the classroom. Many of these services are available to schools through Family Service Centers at local installations or National Guard State Family Program offices.
- Maintain open communication with the child's parents or guardians. If a student seems especially troubled, consider planning a counseling session for the student to talk about his or her concerns or invite the counselor to talk to the class about military service.
- Ultimately, a supportive school environment can foster a sense of belonging and provide consistency in daily schedules to help students maintain needed structure and a sense of control.

## Additional Resources

Crafting learning opportunities around the deployment experiences of students in your classroom can provide great educational opportunities for the entire class. Students can benefit from exploring information about culture, geography, math and social studies through teaching tools organized around the deployed family member's geographic location. Opportunities for social awareness, empathy and emotional skill building can become part of the curriculum. Examples include service-based learning projects for fellow students experiencing a difficult time with a family member's deployment. The goal is to bring needed support and understanding to the deployment process and to maintain an optimal learning environment in the classroom.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *Department of Defense Education Activity's Military K-12 Partners*, [www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu](http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu)
- » *Educators Guide to the Military Child during Deployment*, [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf)
- » *FOCUS: Family Resiliency Training™ for Military Families*, [www.focusproject.org](http://www.focusproject.org)
- » *Military Child Education Coalition*, [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)
- » *Military Impacted Schools Association*, [www.militaryimpactedschoolsassociation.org](http://www.militaryimpactedschoolsassociation.org)
- » *Military Kids Connect*, [www.militarykidsconnect.org](http://www.militarykidsconnect.org)
- » *Military OneSource*, [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)
- » *Military Youth on the Move*, [apps.militaryonesource.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=123:HOME2:0](http://apps.militaryonesource.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=123:HOME2:0)
- » *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, [www.nctsnct.org/resources/topics/military-children-and-families](http://www.nctsnct.org/resources/topics/military-children-and-families)
- » *Operation: Military Kids*, [www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org)
- » *National Military Family Association, Community Toolkit for Educators*, [www.militaryfamily.org/publications/community-toolkit/3-educators.html](http://www.militaryfamily.org/publications/community-toolkit/3-educators.html)
- » *Resource Guides on Military-Connected Students*, [buildingcapacity.usc.edu/research/guides-detailed-trial.html](http://buildingcapacity.usc.edu/research/guides-detailed-trial.html)

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## About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



## About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

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