

## THE MILITARY CHILD WITHIN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### The Need to Support Military Children

The impact of the war on the schooling of students from military families remains largely unrecognized within civilian public school settings. Yet recent studies have shown that supportive school environments can potentially serve as a protective factor that shields students from depression, conduct problems, feelings of alienation, anxiety, and school failure (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009; Comer, 1996; Dryfoos, 1995; Garbarino, 1995). Civilian teachers, principals, and school support personnel, however, have never been systematically trained at the pre-service university level to understand and appropriately respond to the intense experiences of children with deployed parents. In the absence of better preparation of personnel in schools on issues specific to military families, studies show that military students are at increased risk of school violence, substance use, suicide, and dropout (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Lester, Peterson, Reeves, & Knauss, 2010; Mansfield, Kaufman, Engel, & Gaynes, 2011; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009).

### Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) & Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

More than any other conflicts since World War II, the prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed increased demands on the families of those who serve in the

military. A recent study found that mental health problems were more likely to be diagnosed among children who had a parent deployed at least once to Iraq or Afghanistan (Mansfield et al., 2011). Furthermore, the risk of mental health problems among those children rose with increased length of parents' deployment. Without appropriate intervention from families and schools, the burdens of coping with death, physical disability, or the intense mental strain of a traumatized parent can have short- and long-term detrimental effects on military children (Cozza, Guimond, McKibben, Chun, Arata-Maiers, Schneider, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2010; Gorman et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010).

While public schools can play a critical role in increasing the resilience of children to separation, loss, and other effects of parental deployment, only a few evidence-based interventions exist specifically addressing this challenge within civilian environments (e.g., UCLA's Families OverComing Under Stress). At present, there are approximately 1.2 million school-aged children with parents on active duty. Ensuring the highest educational, social, and emotional success of these children during these uniquely stressed times is part of our shared social contract with those who serve the nation.

### The Military Child in the School Context

Regardless of the academic level of the child (e.g., preschool, high school), the public school system must be made aware of four major life experiences that may occur in each and every military child's lifetime: transition, mobility, deployment and trauma. In turn, these experiences could potentially have a direct bearing on the academic performance and social-emotional well-being of the military child.

**Transition.** When a child grows up with one or both parents in the military, it is almost

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inevitable that he or she will change schools more often than his or her non-military peers (Council of State Governments, 2008). The life of a military child is an ongoing series of transitions that does not always require physical relocation. Every time a parent is deployed or returns from an assignment, family dynamics change (e.g., changing roles and responsibilities) (Mmari et al., 2009). Thus being “the new kid” in school is not the only time a military child may be distracted by shifts in their home environment. While making new students feel welcome is one responsibility that schools have, it is also important to provide ongoing support for military students in the school setting.

**Mobility.** It is well documented that students who frequently change schools are less likely to perform well academically than those who are more stable (Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003; Wood, 1992). Highly transient students can fall behind in school because of missed school days or problems adjusting to a new school, new classmates and teachers.

**Deployment.** Deployment refers to the assignment of an individual or a military unit to an overseas location for a task or a mission (Exum, Coll, & Weiss, 2011). When a military servicemember is deployed for a training exercise or to the middle of a war zone, each and every deployment can affect the servicemember’s child(ren) in different ways.

*Changing Roles in the Family.* Possibly the most disruptive aspect of a parent’s deployment is that the family members remaining behind must take on the responsibilities of the deployed parent (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). For children who tend to rely on routines and structure, this can be especially upsetting. Additional household chores, or responsibilities such as taking care of younger siblings, can shift to older children and affect whether they are getting their school work done or maintaining their involvement in extra-curricular activities. When a single-parent is deployed, the upheaval may be even greater. Children may have to move in with family, friends, or relatives.

*Financial Stress.* If the parent being deployed was responsible for managing the family’s finances (e.g., paying the bills, handling car main-

tenance) the remaining parent may feel completely unprepared to assume these duties, especially if there is limited communication between parents during the deployment period. Moreover, if the family recently moved, the remaining spouse might also still be looking for employment. In addition, increased child-care costs—which may not have been necessary when two parents were at home—can also create an economic and sometimes unexpected burden on military families.

*Relocating during a Deployment.* While one parent is deployed, the remaining parent may decide to move in with a family member or supportive other who is able to provide assistance during this difficult time—even if this means moving across the country. While such a decision may provide more adult supervision and care for the children, it can also disrupt a child’s schooling and force him or her to adjust to another home and social environment.

*Multiple Deployments.* One consequence of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that many families have experienced multiple deployments. Just when a child gets used to having a parent home again, the parent is sent on another mission. The relief of having a parent back in the home is not fully experienced. “Multiple deployments” can also mean that a child has two parents in the military and both are deployed simultaneously or consecutively. In this case, the child has a less stable home environment. One recent study, however, suggests that some adolescents may learn to cope better with each deployment (Weber & Weber, 2005).

*Reintegration and Changing Relationships with the Deployed Parent.* For younger and older children alike, a year or 18 months is a large period of time in which significant physical, social, and emotional development occurs. The way in which the child and the deployed parent interact, communicate, and play together may be significantly different following the deployment period. Expectations for both the child and the parent may be unrealistic. The deployment may also cause negative changes in the relationship between the parents, which could turn what the child expected to be a happy reunion into one filled with fear, anxiety and resentment (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005; Huebner et al., 2007).

**Traumatic Experiences.** As previously mentioned, being separated from a parent for an extended period can be more upsetting for some children than it is for others, depending on a variety of factors. For some military children, an additional school transfer—especially if previous moves were problematic—may be the event that triggers emotions and behaviors that are more serious than just being disappointed and angry. Living with fear that a parent—or another relative—serving in the military is in danger can traumatize a child to the point where it significantly affects their ability to function in the school environment. In addition, servicemembers often return from a wartime deployment changed by the experience. The effects can be physical—as with an injury—or psychological, and can impact the servicemember’s parenting ability.

**Wounded Parents.** Thousands of children have had a parent wounded in action since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Davis, 2010). Some injuries are serious enough to require rehabilitation and could extend the time that a child is separated from his or her parent. A debilitating injury can dramatically affect that parent’s relationship with the child and can contribute to additional shifts in household responsibilities in the home, even after the deployed parent has returned.

While some injuries are visible, others are invisible, as is the case with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). TBI is a condition in which a violent blow to the head causes a collision between the brain and inside of the skull. The rampant use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in many veterans returning with a TBI, an injury that is difficult to diagnose, but can have lasting effects. To a child, especially a young child, his or her parent may appear the same but symptoms, such as headaches, concentration problems, mood changes, depression, anxiety, and fatigue can significantly interfere with parent-child/family relationships.

Even if a parent returns from theater without physical injury, psychological wounds may increase stress in the home, damage the relation-

ship between parent and child and can further affect how that child performs in school. Depression, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse and other mental health issues are not uncommon among returning veterans (Cozza et al., 2010; Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cottig, & Koffman, 2004).

The above injuries and behaviors are understandably upsetting for a child and may affect his or her relationship with their parent. The child may feel that they are causing their parent to remember their trauma (i.e., that their behavior (or misbehavior) is triggering their parent’s traumatic memories). They may also begin to feel as if their parent does not love them, and similar to their parent, begin to exhibit symptoms of trauma. Some experts describe this phenomenon as secondary trauma (Galovski & Lyons, 2004).

**The Death of a Parent.** The military has specific procedures for notifying and caring for family members upon the death of a servicemember. Schools may not be among the first to know if the parent of a child has died in combat or as a result of other military action. This is one reason why it is essential for schools to have a plan in place for responding to a parent’s death—whether the parent is in the military or not. In the event of a parent’s death, the way a school responds is not only significant for the child who has lost a parent, but for other students and members of the community, many of whom will be struggling with how to talk to and show support to the student when he or she returns to the classroom.

In January 2011, President Obama issued the following statement when he launched the Presidential Directive to Strengthen and Support Military Families,

*With millions of military spouses, parents and children sacrificing as well, the readiness of our Armed Forces depends on the readiness of our military families.*

Among the four target areas that were unveiled

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is a greater focus on the education of military children within the public school system. Moving forward, there is no better time than now to assist in this national effort to provide greater support to our military children within the school context and to realize the vision of a better future for our military children.

### **Recommendations for Transforming the Public School System**

How can the public school system be transformed to support military students and their families? Below are some recommendations to create and sustain a welcoming school environment for military families, an environment that promotes the academic success and social-emotional well-being of each and every military student.

- 1. Transform the nature of Impact Aid.** Impact Aid is intended to compensate school districts when they lose a portion of their tax base because federal property—such as a military installation—is located within their boundaries. Schools serving a significant percentage of military children—at least 400 students or 3 percent of their average daily attendance—can apply for the federally funded Impact Aid program. However, as of this writing, (a) this initiative is not fully funded, which means that not all eligible school districts are awarded funds, and (b) once funds are received by the district, they are used at the discretion of the schools. For this initiative to have a greater reach and effect on military children, Impact Aid should (a) be fully funded and made available to all eligible school districts, and (b) include addressing military families' schooling as a funding requirement (i.e., schools must demonstrate how funds are directly benefitting military students and their families).
- 2. Implement the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (Interstate Compact).** Broadly conceived, the goal of the Interstate Compact is to provide systemic support to military children in the areas that have historically been problematic for these families—enrollment, placement, eligibility, and graduation (Council of State Gov-

ernments, 2008). Gaps in the dissemination of information and implementation, however, hinder the ability of civilian public schools to provide consistent support to military children. As of this writing, thirty-nine states have endorsed the Interstate Compact. While the responsiveness of states to this initiative is a positive development, implementing the Interstate Compact at the local level has been challenging. In order to be effective, states must support the Interstate Compact by informing district and/or school personnel of the initiative's policy implications.

- 3. Adopt the Common Core Standards.** The Common Core State Standards (Common Core) is an effort led by two national organizations—the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association—to develop clear and consistent guidelines for what students are expected to learn and to prepare them for college and/or careers. The Common Core, in effect, mirrors the approach used by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools. Proponents of the Common Core, which the Obama Administration is urging states to adopt, say that in addition to allowing for comparison of student performance across the country, the Common Core also makes it easier for educators to share best practices about instruction. This uniformity ensures that military children, who often must pick up and change schools with little advance preparation, won't fall behind in school or have to repeat material that they have already covered. The Common Core creates a predictable situation for families who tend to have unpredictable lives.
- 4. Create a sustainable data system at the state/national level to allow schools to identify military students and their respective needs.** There needs to be a systematic way for states to share educational and health information on military children who move between states, and as a result, have official records in more than one state. This type of technology would facilitate school enrollment, grade placement, and the awarding of course credit—all of which are issues that students in military families encounter.

DoDEA schools have created a standardized process to ensure that there is as little delay as possible in students' enrollment and learning.

Furthermore, this type of information empowers educators to identify schools with high military student enrollments and to make decisions on the appropriation of school resources and supports. Equally important, at the national level, this type of data will help inform the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to address the needs of military children within the schools. At the state level, California is already at the forefront of this data-driven effort. In collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the University of Southern California, the state developed the Military Connected School Module for Students, Parents and Staff as part of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). The CHKS is an anonymous survey collected every other year among 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in all 10,000 schools within California. The module was piloted with approximately 22,000 students, 2,500 staff, and 3,900 parents in the Spring of 2011 within schools participating in the Building Capacity Consortium.

**5. Fully fund School Liaison Officers so they can serve all military students using a transition center model (Military Children's Interstate Compact Commission, 2011).** Transition centers are school-based centers that offer informational and referral services, and in some cases direct services, for military students and families who recently relocated to the community and school.

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#### NOTE

This policy brief was written by members of the Building Capacity Consortium Research Team (<http://buildingcapacityusc.edu>) based at the University of Southern California (USC). The Consortium is a partnership between USC and eight military-connected school districts in the San Diego and Riverside Counties (Bonsall Union, Chula Vista Elementary, Escondido Union Elementary, Escondido Union High, Fallbrook Union Elementary, Fallbrook Union

High, Oceanside Unified, and Temecula Valley Unified). The Consortium is funded by DoDEA (HE1254-10-1-0041, PI/Project Leader: Ron Avi Astor, Ph.D., 2010-2014), and aims to create sustainable and replicable infrastructures for data-driven models of responsive and supportive schools.

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#### AUTHOR BACKGROUND

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*The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR) or collaborating agencies and funders.*

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