



National Center for Mental Health Promotion
and Youth Violence Prevention

MILITARY FAMILIES Impact On Children And Families' Mental Health

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Agenda/Objectives

- Discuss and explore the impact of war on children's and families' mental health.
- Provide participants with the prevention brief on Military Families.
- Provide participants with a set of resources that further support effective strategies to address school mental health issues related to this topic.
- Share two SSHS project directors' experiences.

War Today

- “The numbers, as of October 2009, show that more than 2 million men and women have shouldered those deployments, with 793,000 of them deploying more than once.”¹
- Sharp increase in the amount of American troops deployed during Iraq and Afghanistan wars.
- Redeployed military members and families have little time to readjust before another deployment.

¹ Tan, Michelle. “2 million troops have deployed since 9/11.” *Marine Corps Times* 18 December 2009: n. pag. Web. 4 March 2010.
<http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2009/12/military_deployments_121809w/>

Three Phases of Deployment

- Pre-deployment – often characterized by fear, anxiety, and denial prior to the service member's departure.
- Deployment – families learn to survive and adapt to their new lives while service member is gone.
- Post-deployment – soldiers reintegrate into society and families readjust.

Children's Behaviors: Pre-deployment

- Inconsolable crying, clinging to parent.
- Unresolved fears, nightmares, sleep disturbance.
- Uncharacteristic tantrums.
- Behavioral changes to personality.
- Anxiety reactions.

Effective Strategies

- Topic of military deployment should be considered by administrators, principals, student support services, faculty groups, PTA/PTO's and the community at large.
- Topic should be reviewed periodically as part of the district's emergency planning process.
- Map potential resources within your community.
- Schedule professional development for teachers and school counselors.
- Create physical space for mental health support and academic support.

Effective Strategies

- Stress the importance of creating action plans.
- Create family support groups and on-line network supports.
- Talk to children about the meaning/impact of war in terms that they can understand.
- Normalize idea of war by having kids write about it in journals or openly discussing it.
- Make web sites and other information available to families.
- For children with parents in the military reserves, acknowledge the floating anxiety that they may feel when there is talk of deployments.

Children's Behaviors: Deployment

- Unexplained crying or tearfulness.
- Resistance to role changes.
- Anger toward at-home parent.
- Increased acts of violence toward people or things.
- Sleep difficulties or disturbances (waking, bad dreams).
- Eating difficulties or change in eating patterns.

Children's Behavior Deployment

- Fear of new people or situations.
- A rise in complaints about stomachaches, headaches, or other illnesses.
- Problems at school including frequent disruptive behavior.
- Low self-esteem and self-criticism.
- Loss of interest in usual interests and hobbies.

Effective Strategies

- Provide space for youth to speak about their feelings.
- Encourage enrichment activities such as sports and chess.
- Create virtual forums for parents to share stories, swap children's clothing, etc.
- Create support groups for children and parents.
- Provide mental health resources for children and families.
- Recognize students with family members who have been deployed, as an honor, a recognition and not a disability
- Create a check-in space to ask youth how they are doing.

Effective Strategies

- Provide respite places for parents and children to relax.
- Encourage youth to write to the deployed soldier.
- Encourage youth's participation in social engagements such as cell phones for troops.
- Pay extra attention to youth during holidays.
- Be aware that kids may be taking on more stressful roles and responsibilities at home.
- Introduce any families with military reservists to one another. They may be able to better relate to each other.

Children's Behaviors: Post-deployment

- Feelings of guilt.
- Increased need of attention.
- Frequent disruptive behavior in the classroom.
- Fear of the returning parent(s).

Children's Behaviors: Post-deployment

- Adjustment issues with role reversal again.
- May become less responsive and depressed.
- Keep returning parent at a distance.
- Regression in eating/sleeping patterns.

Comments



Picture by Cpl. Enrique Saenz, United States Marines.

Effective Strategies

- Create systemic support system with social workers, mental health personnel, welfare organizations, teachers, and family members.
- Continue to track a child's progress.
- Understand the mental health of students affected by war.
- Communicate your plan for support.
- Create outreach and support programs, connect families to existing community resources.

Effective Strategies

- Explore available military and faith-based supports.
- Exchange resources among educators.
- Provide space for quality activities.
- Address/create support systems for grieving families.
- Returning service members may have long-term physical and emotional injuries (including substance abuse issues) that may lead to long-term physical and emotional adjustments for families.
- Identify children who are isolating themselves.

Homecoming for Troops

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Physical Injuries
- Alcoholism
- Aggressive Behaviors
- Difficulties adjusting to:
 - ▣ Society
 - ▣ Job
 - ▣ New family

Caledonia North Supervisory Union, VT

- Suzanne Masland, 2007 SSHS Project Director.
- District houses 1,000 students in a rural, impoverished area.
- 84 National Guard members deployed.
- To address affects of military deployment on children, the site utilizes:
 - ▣ Guidance counselors
 - ▣ Nurses and school-based clinicians
 - ▣ Collaboration with VT National Guard Family Readiness Center

Caledonia North Supervisory Union, VT

- Dissemination of information to collaborative teams within the school and community.
- The grant facilitates collaboration with National Guard support programs and professional development and outreach to guidance counselors and nurses district-wide groups, as well as local child care providers.
- Changes to family dynamic:
 - Mothers left to take care of families
 - Difficulties with role shifts once soldiers return

Caledonia North Supervisory Union, VT

- Members return with PTSD and substance abuse issues.
- School-based mental health workers provide therapy to children within school setting as well as home visits.
- Clinicians make referrals for substance abuse programs and counseling for other family members.
- High school counselors formed parent support group
- Significant reactions in children:
 - Disruptive behavior
 - Adjustment issues with role confusion
 - Acting out sexually

Caledonia North Supervisory Union, VT

- The site utilizes resources from the Vermont National Guard, including:
 - ▣ Support services
 - ▣ Town meetings
 - ▣ Family readiness center
 - ▣ Professional development opportunities
- Team will offer workshop to parents and childcare providers about coping strategies and resources.

St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, NY

- Marsha Sawyer, 2006 SSHS Project Director of an isolated/rural community that has 22% of children living in poverty, reported:
- Students at this site are coping with the difficulties of having parents deployed overseas.
- Staff members meet with affected parents and groups of siblings.

St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, NY

- Faculty members are proactive and responsive and mentor students providing a positive influence.
- They did establish periodic check-ins with families.
- Created effective collaborations with:
 - ▣ Hospice organizations
 - ▣ School-community liaisons

St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, NY

- Going forward, district teams would like to:
 - ▣ Work with students to understand expectations of families and help attain positive goals.
 - ▣ Brainstorm ways to proactively address families without being intrusive.
 - ▣ Sponsor education/focus groups.
 - ▣ Make information available via Web site, fliers, or brochures.

Q&A



Resources

www.promoteprevent.org

- **Pre-Deployment:**
 - [Talking to Children About Going to War](#)
 - [Helping Your Child Prepare for a Parent's Deployment](#)
- **Deployment:**
 - [Deployment: Your Children and Separation](#)
 - ["So Far" Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope with the Deployment of a Parent in the Military Reserves](#)
- **Post-Deployment:**
 - [NASP Dialogues: Military Families and the Reintegration Process](#)
 - [Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families of Military Members](#)
- **Military Reserves:**
 - [Army Reserve Child and Youth Services \(CYS\)](#)
 - [Air Force Family Member Programs](#)
 - [National Guard Family Program](#)

Resources

- Injury and Death:
 - [Traumatic Grief in Military Children](#)
 - [Caring for Kids after Trauma and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals](#)
- Educators and Parents:
 - [Suggestions for Educators](#)
 - [Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment](#)
 - [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)
- MH Specialists/Psychologists/Social Workers/Guidance Counselors:
 - [Good Behavior Game](#)
 - [Same Sky Sharing](#)
 - [Trauma-Informed Care: A New Framework for Healing and Recovery](#)
- School Personnel and Communities:
 - [School Connectedness – Extending Connections to Military Children](#)
 - [Working with Military Children – A Primer for School Personnel](#)