

EDUCATORS, MILITARY CHILDREN, AND DEPLOYMENT



INTRODUCTION

- Increased demands on Service members and their families
- Children are especially vulnerable due to developmental perspective and limited life experience
- Stability/normal routine at school can provide anchor



BACKGROUND

- U.S. Military is composed of both active and reserve components
 - “~~R~~Reserve” component includes National Guard as well as Reserves
 - Active families live on or near military bases
 - National Guard and Reserve families often live all over
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DEPLOYMENT

- Definition: An individual or military unit is moved within the U.S. or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission
 - Training exercise
 - Humanitarian mission
 - Peacekeeping activities
 - Combat

DEPLOYMENT—OVERALL IMPACT

- Stress due to change
- Family roles redistributed
- Grief and loss
- Young families tend to return to location of family of origin
- Families/individuals with pre-existing problems at higher risk for poor adjustment
- Modern technology double-edged sword

PHASES OF DEPLOYMENT

- Pre-deployment—Several weeks to one year
- Deployment—Departure of soldier through first month
- Sustainment—First through next-to-last month of deployment
- Pre-reunion—Month before soldier is scheduled to return home
- Post deployment/Reunion—45 days

Pre-deployment

(Several weeks to a year)

➤ Family is notified that member will be deployed

- General shock, disbelief
- Alternate between denial and anticipation of loss
- Order, security, safety of lives feels shattered
- Busy, tumultuous time preparing for soldier's departure
- May strive for increased closeness
- Soldier is “psychologically deployed”
- Common for parents to have significant argument

Deployment

(From time soldier leaves through first month)

- Lots of support on day of deployment
- Support drops off rapidly, leaving family to cope with grief/loss on their own
- Remaining family members struggle with new/increased roles and responsibilities
 - Elementary age children may experience a “honeymoon” period (few weeks) with remaining caretaker
- Mixed emotions

Overwhelmed, disoriented

- Numb, sad, lonely, abandoned
- Relief

Sustainment

(From first through next-to-last month of deployment)

➤ Level of adjustment varies

- Majority of families reach “new normal”
 - Resume life with renewed resiliency and hope
 - New routines established
 - Plug into new sources of support
 - Feelings of being in control are regained
 - Renewed confidence, independence; “I can do this!”
 - May struggle with past problems, depression
 - May experience new conflicts

Pre-reunion

(One month before soldier scheduled to return)

➤ Mixed emotions (again!)

- Anticipation, apprehension, excitement
- Exaggerated expectations—good and bad
- Difficulty making decisions
 - What would returning soldier want?



Post deployment/Reunion

(Three to six months from time soldier returns)

- Initially experienced with joy for most families
- Family members will have changed
 - Remaining family members may resent surrendering independence
 - Conflicts may arise over roles, responsibilities
 - These may have existed before deployment
- Below surface are normal issues that must be addressed
- Opportunity to negotiate improved relationships
 - Family/individual counseling may be needed

YOUR ROLE....

- Adults' response to crisis significantly effects outcome of student's experience
- Supportive interventions
 - Minimize stress response
 - Allow learning to resume
 - Creates sense of class cohesiveness
 - Helps re-establish student's sense of security and belonging in class

DEPLOYMENT AND THE CLASSROOM

- Deployment destabilizes family, creating stress
- Prolonged stress alters brain chemistry and function, resulting in problems with:
 - Concentration
 - Memory
 - Learning new concepts
 - Control of emotional expression
 - Behavior

A CHILD'S WORLD....



Child's Perspective of Deployment

- Departure of family member destabilizes family
- Child's safety feels threatened
 - What other sudden change might occur?
- Sense of “loss of control”
 - Fundamental human need
 - Can produce overwhelming feelings

Child's Perspective of Deployment

- Individual reactions can vary greatly
 - Overactive, disruptive
 - Quiet, withdrawn
 - May be harder to spot
 - May be at greater risk
- Often includes fear for their own safety
- Conversely, may express relief
 - Puts end to pre-existing family tension
 - Resolves anxiety and uncertainty about details of actual separation

Child's Perspective of Deployment

- Stress reactions generally appear within 24 to 48 hours
- Delayed reactions can cause problems weeks or months later, i.e., “~~an~~ anniversary reaction”
- Primary difference between normal and serious stress reaction is in degree and duration
- If symptoms persist for several weeks or seem extreme, refer to counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse, family physician, etc.
- Keep primary caretaker informed of concerns

Child's Perspective of Reunion

- Common stress reactions as listed above
- Child may stuff feelings until soldier returns
- Age specific reactions to reunion
 - Less than 1 year—May not recognize returning soldier; cries when held
 - 1 to 3 years—Slow to warm up to returning soldier
 - 3 to 6 years—Guilt and fear about separation
 - 6 to 12 years—Demands lots of attention
 - 13 to 18 years—Moody; appears to not care about returning soldier

CHILDREN AND STRESS



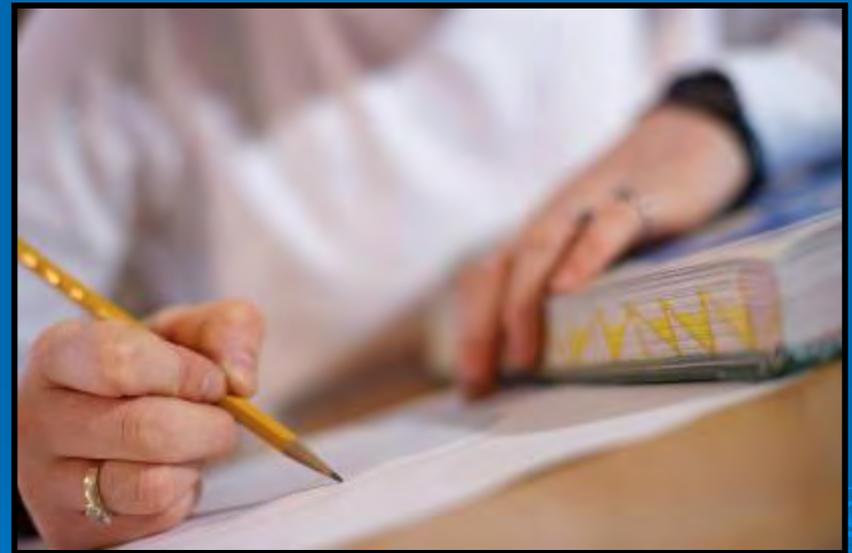
Common Stress Reactions in Children Ages 1 to 5

- Regressive behavior
- Persistent fears
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Sadness
- Immobility
- Disobedience
- Nightmares
- Clinging



Common Stress Reactions in Children Ages 6 to 12

- Regressive behavior
- Persistent fears
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Physical complaints
- Inability to concentrate
- Sleep disturbance
- School problems
- Depression
- Change in social activities
- Fighting



Common Stress Reactions in Children Ages 13 to 18



- Behavior changes
- Fear of storms
- Confusion
- Physical complaints
- Inability to concentrate
- Sleep disturbance
- Apathy
- Depression
- Change in
 - Social activities
 - Academic performance
 - Athletic performance
 - Peer group
 - Appetite

Common Reactions Children May Experience

- Stress due to change
 - What other sudden change might occur?
- Family roles redistributed
- Grief and loss
- Concern over love and protection
- Anger at parents
- Aggression in play, behavior or communication
- Physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, stomach aches, trouble sleeping, headaches, restlessness, nausea
- Regression in younger children

OTHER REACTIONS

- R&R Leave – soldier is home for a short period of time and then leaves again
 - Why do you have to leave again?
 - When are you staying home for good?
 - Why can't I go with you?
- Reunions – Post Deployment – can be the most difficult period
 - Unsure of the trust – will soldier leave again
 - Doesn't trust uniform – going to first drill weekend may cause mixed feelings for children
 - Resentment/Anger/Excited/Wants to be home with soldier not at school

CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS



CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

➤ Provide structure

- Maintain predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences

➤ Maintain objectivity

- Respond to events in calm, caring manner
- Answer questions in simple, direct terms
- Refrain from expressing personal opinions about military involvement if it could be hurtful to student

CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

- Reinforce safety and security
 - End classroom discussions of deployment-related events on a positive note
 - Protect students from unnecessary exposure to frightening situations and reminders
 - Limit adult-to-adult conversations in presence of students
 - Use television news as backdrop with caution

CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

- Be patient and temporarily reduce student workload as needed
 - Shorter lessons, slower pace
- Be approachable, attentive, and sensitive
 - Take time to discuss deployment
 - Provide factual information
 - Limit scary or hurtful communication
 - Recognize inappropriate behavior as an effort to cope with overwhelming feelings

CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

- Be sensitive to students whose families have a primary language other than English
- Reassure student that their feelings are normal
- Acknowledge that it is natural to feel hurt and angry when someone we care about leaves
- Reinforce ways to express feelings without hurting self or others



INTERVENTION STRATEGIES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM



INTERVENTION STRATEGIES for Elementary-age Children

- Engage in play activities
- Engage in art activities
 - Paint or draw pictures reflecting feelings/thoughts
- Read and discuss stories
 - Children in conflict
 - Children as problem-solvers
- Participate in small group discussions
- Participate in support groups
- Exercise

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES for Elementary-age Children

- Write to deployed soldier
- Make memory book, treasure box, calendar
 - Focus on positive thoughts and actions
- Participate in individual or group counseling
- Write poetry, stories or journal
- Use relaxation techniques
- Learn problem-solving strategies
- Listen to music

GRADE SCHOOL AGE CHILD

- Expect questions about the war from this age group
- Use simple and clear language
- Use a globe to show how far away the war is
- Do not tell them not to worry about a soldier
- Explain that the soldier has prepared for the job for this moment in time
- Be honest – Tell them adults are working hard to keep them safe

MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL



- Encourage journal writings
- Engage in art activities
- Encourage poetry and story writing
- Writing cards and letters to deployed family member
- Participate in small group discussions
- Encourage participation in support groups
- Use music and exercise to promote coping

What can the School Do:

- Be cautious and sensitive when having political discussions in classes or showing a “war” video in class
- Be aware of who is around when having adult political conversations
- Have the class write letters or send pictures to the deployed soldier
- Have the deployed soldier visit the classroom when he/she returns



What Can Schools Do Continued:

- Encourage other students to support the deployed soldiers family – the school can do a donation drive collecting items to be packaged and sent to troops overseas
- Hang yellow ribbons in the classroom/around the school
- Keep line of communications open with the parents

Support Group for Children

- Start a support group in the school for the children if a large number of parents are deployed
- Let the children guide the group with a counselor serving as a facilitator
- Meet once a week for ½ hr or monthly – depending on how often the kids want to meet
- Plan time for activities and discussions that may arise as a result of the activity
- Get a permission form signed by the parents that the child may attend the support group

HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP

- Schools can be one place where stability and normal routine can provide an anchor for children.
- Predictability of the classroom helps cushion impact of the deployment and disruption to daily life.



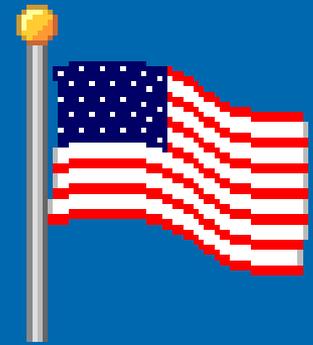
Points to remember

- Respect security issues and too much information sharing
- Make sure activities are age appropriate
- Encourage the children to seek the school's counselors or to talk to the teacher
- Keep lines of communication open between parents and educators

Helpful Resources:

- Military Child Education Coalition Handout at www.militarychild.org
- www.guardfamily.org – Click on Educator
- Book – My Daddy is a Soldier – by Hilbrecht – www.newcanaanpublishing.com
- http://www.operationhomefront.org/Info/info_kids.shtml
Coloring books and Emotional Activity links.

CONCLUSION



- While deployments are stressful, they may provide opportunities for families to grow closer and stronger.
- Remember, teachers are in a unique position to offer that stability and support that may be disrupted at home, showing you care goes a long way.

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