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Schools have a range of options to help families adapt to the frequent moves required by a career in the military

By Erica Natalicchio and Christopher Wooleyhand

Every year, half a million military children leave their homes and schools to travel to new destinations across the U.S. and around the world. Military families average such a move, known as a permanent change of station (PCS), every two to three years. This creates significant challenges for families who bear an inordinate number of obstacles related to military service.

State and local school systems must support military families as they transition to new locations. According to the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, states must provide uniform treatment of military children as they transfer between school districts, observing its guidelines for the transfer of records, academic information, and placement, as well as guidance on immunization records, age of entry, and special education services.

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) issued a brief in 2010, “Trauma Faced by Children of Military Families—What Every Policymaker Should Know,” which outlines the impact multiple deployments can have on military children. These include high rates of mental health issues, trauma, and related problems; changes in school performance; and higher rates of behavioral and emotional difficulties. The brief also noted that redeployment often impacts the mental health status of at-home caregivers, compounding its effect on children.

NCCP’s research says that children are resilient to the effects of changes in parental deployment. But the brief confirms that families who receive support services experience less deployment-related stress. This is where schools come in: With time and focused effort, schools can develop a range of supports for military-connected families.

Welcoming Military Families

Schools are often the first source of assistance in helping military families feel connected to their new communities. To nurture a sense of belonging, schools can host new-student orientations over the summer and after winter break—common transition periods. New-student orientations should give families the chance to tour the school, ask questions, and meet

the key personnel who play an active role in students' academic and social success.

Schools can improve service delivery, access, and relationships by becoming familiar with community-based resources. Offering convenient mental health services on-site allows for long-term care and support. School counselors should work quickly to connect with new families, especially those with children who have special needs. They should be trained to identify and understand the signs that indicate a student might be under serious emotional distress.

School counselors and administrators should also be familiar with TRICARE, a commonly used health insurance provider for military families. As with nonmilitary families, insurance coverage often impacts the quality and availability of services.

School counselors have a responsibility to think above and beyond the usual comprehensive curriculum when working with a unique population. School counselors can assist military-connected families by:

- Scheduling every student for a “minute meeting” with them. Minute meetings allow for a quick, general glimpse of how the student is feeling during his or her first few days of school and allow him or her to identify the role of the school counselor.
- Fostering relationships with the school liaison officer to strengthen community partnerships. Families often rely on that officer to understand the new community; counselors can be the link to that partnership.
- Organizing a new-student ambassador program. Student-to-student outreach allows new students to meet and make friends at their new school while creating connections with classmates. Student ambassadors can greet new students, give them a tour, or sit with them at lunch on their first day.
- Welcoming the entire family to promote the success of the military-connected student. Often, a spouse will seek volunteer opportunities. Schools should be open in communicating those opportunities and encourage parents to get involved.
- Hosting a community social and emotional learning event that recognizes the challenges for military-connected families. Schools should look for and develop presentations that address the unique needs of military-connected families.

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There are numerous resources, organizations, and programs available to support schools and military-connected families. These include educational liaisons, the Exceptional Family Member Program, the Military Child Education Coalition, and various wraparound social services. Each provides very specific services for families and schools.

1. Educational liaisons. Every military base or post employs an educational liaison to assist families and schools. School liaison officers are the point of contact on an installation for everything school-related. Typically civilians, they are familiar with unique aspects of military life that can affect families. They help build partnerships between families, installations, and schools.

2. The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). Run by the Department of Defense, this program assists families by identifying and enrolling family members with special medical or educational needs. Representatives find out what services are available at a current or new duty station, and they support families with information, referrals, and nonclinical case management. EFMP assists service members with assignment coordination, ensuring family members' needs are considered during relocations.

3. The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). The Military Child Education Coalition is a nonprofit organization that helps military children thrive in the face of transition and separation. MCEC works to ensure inclusive, quality educational opportunities for military-connected children. Its goals include:

- Ensuring that the academic, social, and emotional needs of military children are recognized, supported, and provided for;

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- Empowering parents and other supporting adults to ensure that military-connected children are college- and career-ready; and
- Fostering a strong community of partners that is committed to supporting an environment in which military-connected children can thrive.

MCEC has an extensive online library related to supporting military families, and its online newsletters, *Voice for the Military Child* and *Just Sayin'*, are excellent resources. MCEC also holds an annual National Training Seminar in Washington, D.C., that brings together a diverse group of educators, liaisons, parents, and service members.

4. Wraparound social work supports. The armed forces provide military families with a range of supports for all aspects of military life. Counseling services for members and families are free and confidential, and the military offers resources including:

- Military financial and legal assistance;
- Job and education help for military spouses;
- Parenting and military child care assistance;
- Deployment help for military families;
- Moving assistance for military families; and
- Health and wellness assistance.

The challenge for schools is to build awareness and coordination when it comes to helping military families access social services and supports. Counselors play a critical role in connecting families with the resources they need, and they can help by developing partnerships with military-funded social service providers.

- Inviting local military units into the school as role models. With parents deployed, this can help students actively engage with adult role models during structured playtime.
- Celebrating the Month of the Military Child in April. Link up with parent volunteers and PTA or PTO to celebrate the unique life of the military child. Schools with a large military population often celebrate “Purple Up Day,” recognizing all service branches.
- Creating your own challenge coin to recognize good character. Challenge coins are a military tradition meant to instill pride, recognize hard work and dedication, and show appreciation for one’s service. Schools with a large military population can task their students with creating a personalized school challenge coin. Students can be nominated by any member of the faculty to receive a challenge coin.
- Inviting the base or garrison commander to speak to the faculty. A school’s relationship with the base commander can provide positive outcomes for children and families. Ask them to speak to the staff about the unique aspects of the installation to give teachers a fresh perspective on what it means to serve in the military.
- Using community-building circles to enhance relationships with new students. Community-building circles are a structured process designed to build a trustworthy and encouraging classroom environment. Because of the number of school transitions that military-connected students experience, developing positive relationships with peers can be more challenging than with nonmilitary children.

Schools have the resources and expertise to provide the most important thing military families need—peace of mind. By recognizing and supporting the unique needs of these families, schools can make at least one aspect of their lives a little easier. In a small way, schools serve their country by taking good care of military-connected children. That is an honorable and achievable goal—one that can give a whole country a little hope. 

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READ MORE

To find out more about the educational transition issues military families often encounter, check out the Interstate Compact Guide for Schools: bit.ly/34huHpl

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) is a DOD program that works with military and civilian agencies to provide community support, housing, health care, and other services to special-needs families in the military: bit.ly/2E58ZKV

NCCP’s “Trauma Faced by Children of Military Families—What Every Policymaker Should Know” discusses the numerous impacts that the stress of multiple deployments can produce for active-duty military personnel and their families: bit.ly/36wEA4p