Supporting the behavioral and mental health needs of military children

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Supporting the behavioral and mental health needs of military children

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ABSTRACT
It is estimated that there are 1,678,778 military children in the United States, with 80% of them attending U.S. civilian operated public schools. Therefore, it is critical that educators across school settings have access to information that supports the academic, behavioral, and social emotional health of military children. The current paper provides an overview of the resiliency that military children possess, as well as the unique challenges they may experience as part of military life, including the deployment cycle. Further, available mental health supports for military children and families are provided for schools to consider as part of their overall support for military children and families.

KEYWORDS
Deployment cycle; military children; military families; military supports in schools

Over 3.5 million U.S. personnel make up the entirety of the military. Among Military Active Duty and Selected Reserve populations, there are 2,103,415 military personnel. Of these personnel, 39.6 percent have children and 6 percent are single with children. In total there are 1,678,778 military children (Department of Defense (DoD), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (ODASD (MC&FP), 2017). These statistics show that there are many school-aged children in our educational systems that are connected with the military and exposed to the stressors of military life, such as frequent relocations and parental deployments (DePedro et al., 2011). Furthermore, some of these families are composed of single parents in the military, which may result in increased stressors if that parent deploys. Also, families with both spouses in the military may face similar challenges to single parent households when facing deployment. Due to the unique military lifestyle, children of military families may have an increased risk of mental health and behavioral challenges throughout their development (McGuinness & McGuinness, 2014). Nearly 80% of children connected with the military attend civilian operated public schools (U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, 2017). Therefore, it is important for school personnel and professionals across all school environments to understand the strengths that military children bring to school and work to mitigate stressors and challenges they face as part of military life (Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esqueda, & Benbenishty, 2013; Fenning, Harris, & Viellieu, 2013; Russo & Fallon, 2015).

Special considerations for educators in supporting military children

Resiliency of military children

While military families face unique challenges that require support, it is also important to recognize the unique strengths and resiliency military families demonstrate each day (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013; Park, 2011). Despite the potentially stressful experiences these families have, such as frequent moves and deployments, military families are quite resilient and strong (Johnson & Ling, 2013). As families experience changes, such as relocations and deployments of one or both parents, all members of the family, including the children, develop skills to prepare and adjust to family changes, building their resiliency and coping strategies (Pisano, 2014). Furthermore, while military families are resilient and strong, they also hold other unique strengths, such as flexibility, resourcefulness, and adaptability (Fenning et al., 2013). Many military families have developed strategies and strength in regard to transitions and the separation of deployment. However, school personnel need to be educated to provide support to military families when they are facing unique stressors, such as military deployments.

Military deployments
The effect of a parental military deployment on children can be significant and greatly affect their behavior, social emotional adjustment, and academic adjustment. Military deployment follows a cycle that brings its own potential stressors depending on the phase the family is experiencing. Therefore, educators should receive psychoeducation regarding the deployment cycle and understand where the children they educate may be within it. Various researchers describe the deployment cycle in somewhat different ways. For example, Johnson and Ling (2013) describe it in three phases, while Riggs and Riggs (2011) describe it in seven phases. Alternatively, Pisano (2014) describes the deployment cycle in five stages. Despite these variations, descriptions of deployment cycles follow a common series of events. For example, the five deployment phases articulated...
by Pisano (2014) are as follows: (1) pre deployment, (2) deployment, (3) rest and relaxation, (4) reunion, and (5) reintegration. These stages each come with potential stressors that may vary based on the developmental stage of the child. For instance, in the pre deployment stage, infants may be fussy and have changes in eating habits, while school-aged children may be sad, angry, or moody. As research shows that the deployment cycle can affect children differently at varying stages, it is important for caregivers, including school professionals, to understand the consequences of each stage of deployment (Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014).

**Impact of deployment on child and adolescent mental health and behavioral functioning**

School professionals should be particularly mindful for the potential that a parental deployment may have on the social-emotional well-being and behavioral health of children and adolescents in military families (Pisano, 2014). For example, Mansfield, Kaufman, Engel, and Gaynes (2011) found that children with a deployed parent have a greater number of mental health diagnoses compared with children whose parent did not deploy. The findings of a related study found that children with deployed parents had an 18%–19% increase in behavioral and stress disorders and an 11% increase in emotional and behavioral related healthcare visits (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010, as cited in Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).

While children of all ages have higher rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms during a parental deployment (McGuinness & McGuinness, 2014), there are some studies which reflect development differences in relation to parental deployment. Mustillo, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Lester (2016) found that young children in military families experiencing a parental deployment have an increased risk for social emotional adjustment issues, less secure attachment patterns, peer problems, and decreased prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, the results of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) and the Ages and Stages Social-Emotional Inventory (ASQ:SE) found that preschool aged children with deployed parents were twice as likely to have failure rates on the measures as compared to children with non-deployed parents (Nguyen, Ee, Berry-Cabán, & Hoedebeke, 2014).

Among older adolescents, Reed, Bell, and Edwards (2011) found that 8th, 10th, and 12th grade boys and girls with a deployed parent were found to have higher odds of reporting suicidal thoughts compared to adolescents without a deployed parent. In a related study, adolescent 10th and 12th grade boys with a deployed parent had increased odds of reporting a low quality of life, as compared to boys without a deployed parent (Reed et al., 2011).

The behavioral adjustment of military children and adolescents when a parent is deployed is another factor that educators need to consider. Moeller, Culler, Hamilton, Aronson, and Perkins (2015) reviewed literature showing that military school-aged children with a deployed parent had an increased rate of problem behaviors and a decrease in academic functioning compared to civilian school-aged children or military school-aged children whose parents were not deployed. The above studies support that children faced with the challenge of deployed military parents may have increased behavioral and social emotional adjustment needs relative to children with non-deployed parents or civilian children.

**Parental mental health during deployment**

The adjustment of the non-deployed parent may also impact the behavioral, academic, and social-emotional health of military children. Parents of military families can experience psychological distress due to deployment and separation, which may be associated with less parental emotional availability and inconsistent home care routines. Also, parental mental health diagnoses are associated with increased anxiety among young children as well as increased depressive symptoms, emotional distress, and reported adjustment issues in school-aged children (McGuinness & McGuinness, 2014). Bello-Utu and DeSocio (2015) found that children’s coping strategies during deployment were affected by the at-home, caregiving parent’s mental health during deployment. Furthermore, the at-home parent and the military parent’s mental health influenced child coping during reintegration.

**Parental stress during deployment**

Other than parental mental health, parental stress can additionally have an impact on military children. This stress is not limited to only one parent, but the stress of both the military parent and the at-home, caregiving parent can affect the children. Flake, Davis, Johnson, and Middleton (2009) found that parental stress was the most significant predictor of child functioning during wartime deployment. Sumner, Boisvert, and Andersen (2016) also found associations between parental mental stress and child functioning. These researchers found that parental mental stress in military families was associated with children’s externalizing behaviors. When parental mental stress increased, the externalizing behaviors among the youth also increased. Taken together, the research literature documents that military children are not only influenced by their own experiences, but by the emotional experiences their parents are facing during deployments as well. Parental stress can impact children’s behavioral and social emotional functioning, particularly in times of deployment, suggesting that support of parents during the deployment cycle is important to promote child well-being and mental health.

**Military family strengths**

The emotional state and coping of parents can have a positive impact on children in all phases of military life and it is important to not focus only on a “deficit” model, but one focused on family strengths (Park, 2011). Educators must be mindful of the strengths and resiliency that military families have and support them from a strength-based perspective (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). While military families face unique stressors and challenges, parents’ responses to these factors can positively impact their children. Sumner et al.
found that increased perceived social support reported by the at-home parent was associated with decreased ratings of externalizing behavior among military children. Also, social connection between parents and children has been shown to benefit military children. Families that perceive more positive social connections with one another have more positive adjustments to the stress of military life (Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudharinaset, & Blum, 2010).

Lester et al. (2016) found that parental sensitivity was positively associated with improvements in social and emotional health in children. Parental social support and sensitivity in military families can be beneficial to children’s behavioral and social emotional adjustment, which can be supported by school-based professionals.

Areas of focus for schools in supporting military youth and families

While military youth are undoubtedly resilient and bring many strengths to school environments (Park, 2011), it is also the case that military children and families face the unique stressors previously described, particularly, frequent moves to new schools and deployment of one or more parents. Educators are in a unique position to support behavioral and mental health needs of military children. With over 80% of military children attending civilian operated public schools (U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, 2017), it is important that the staff at these schools are prepared to provide care for these students through knowledge and awareness of best practices in supporting military children. We stress here the importance of providing educators with resources and professional development in the following areas: (1) the deployment cycle and how it may impact the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success of military students and (2) resources to address wellness and mental health among military children.

Awareness of the deployment cycle

As suggested in Harrison and Vannest’s (2008) article, schools supporting military children should provide teacher and staff training about the deployment cycle, the effects of deployment, and the importance of providing stability in the school in regard to routine, care, and expectations of the children. Many educators are unfamiliar with the deployment cycle and may not know that they have children in their civilian classrooms that are connected with the military or have a parent who may be preparing for or is already deployed. Therefore, professional development and resources about how to support military children and families at the various stages of the deployment cycle should be made available to all educators (Department of Defense, Educational Opportunities Directorate, n.d.). The DOE has produced a document that provides information for teachers about the deployment cycle and potential student reactions, including signs of distress and ways to access mental health support (Department of Defense, Educational Opportunities Directorate, n.d.).

Awareness of mental health supports

With knowledge that deployment and parental coping and emotional health can affect a child of a military family in his or her own development and social emotional adjustment, we highlight mental health supports and programs specifically developed for military families so that educators are aware of them. In addition, We describe them here so that school-based mental health professionals can provide them directly, collaborate with community service providers in their provision, and educate military families they serve about their existence. Esposito-Smythers et al. (2011) provide a comprehensive summary of existing mental health services that are available for military families. These include prevention-oriented psychoeducation, prevention programs for youth and peers, prevention programs for youth and family, and treatment services for youth. An example of an intervention program focused on building strengths is one that employs Sesame Street characters to engage early childhood aged children (Flitner O’Grady, Thomaseon Burton, Chawla, Topp, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Other intervention programs for military families focus on building effective communication between parents and children, as it has been shown to be an important aspect of the parent-child bond that can facilitate children’s adjustment to military stressors. Ashurst et al. (2014) provides information on adventure camps for military personnel recently returning from deployment and their teenage children. The goals of the adventure camps are to improve parent-child bonds through quality time and teamwork, with a significant emphasis on communication. The important role of communication can be linked to the social connectedness theory that Mmari et al. (2010) apply to their research with military families. They found that social connections and communication between parents and children are associated with better adjustment for both parents and children when faced with military stressors. Also, there is support for the positive impact of parental connectedness to groups, neighbors, and fellow service members and child connectedness to other peers. The above programs and supports not only focus on helping military children with their behavioral and social emotional adjustment, but they all involve both parent and child participation as part of a comprehensive and inclusive approach in supporting military families. The research literature reviewed here provides evidence that treatment for military children may be more beneficial when the entire family is involved in the intervention program. Therefore, it is important for professional educators to understand family-centered approaches, either by implementing them directly or educating military families about them, in order to facilitate positive outcomes for military children.

Awareness of Military Interstate Compact Commission (MIC3)

Another important area of professional development for educators is increased awareness and knowledge about the Military Interstate Compact Commission (MIC3) (the “Compact”), which was adopted by all 50 states and the
District of Columbia (DOC) (Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission; Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission (MIC3), 2012). The purpose of the “Compact” was to address the challenges of frequent school transitions that are part of military children’s lives. The Compact specifically addresses educational issues as military children transition across states, such as school enrollment requirements, grade placement, course and graduation requirements, attendance policies, school records and individual education plans (Fenning et al., 2013).

### Relevant resources for educators

Table 1 provides a list of key organizations selected that are dedicated, in whole or in part of their mission, in supporting military children and their families and include resources that are pertinent to educators. The web-site addresses and a short description of relevant content for educational professionals are also included in the table. The information provided through each organization contains a variety of information pertinent for educators and administrators, including professional development opportunities through webinars, downloadable brochures, print materials, and face-to-face training.

### Roles for various school professionals in supporting military children and adolescents

#### School-based mental health professionals

While the school system as a whole is important in providing a welcoming and warm context for military youth as part of system wide prevention-oriented supports (Cozza, Lerner, & Haskins, 2014; Gilreath, Estrada, Pineda, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2014), specific staff members in the school may be in a unique position to provide direct and more individualized services to these families (Fenning et al., 2013). School-based mental health service providers, such as, counselors, social workers, and school psychologists, can provide mental health and wellness support for military children as they serve as advocates for students with mental health, behavioral, and academic needs with specialized training in mental and behavioral health. School psychologists can be essential in sharing information about the unique needs of military families and evidence supported practices to meet their needs in a comprehensive fashion (Fenning et al., 2013; Pisano, 2014). Pisano (2014) and Sherman and Glenn (2011) also discuss that school psychologists and other support staff can provide school-wide support systems and provide teachers with specific information and classroom strategies for military children. Another vital service a school-based mental health professional can provide for military children is mental health counseling (Sherman & Glenn, 2011). Harrison and Vannest (2008) state that student support staff can provide individual and group counseling to military children, specifically with a focus on coping skills and social skills training, areas which military children may need assistance with. School-based mental health support professionals are also in the position to help parents in a variety of ways, such as assistance with connecting to community services and supports or by providing coping skills training directly to parents (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Furthermore, school psychologists specifically can help establish or maintain school connectedness between the family and school, in order to benefit the family and children (Fenning et al., 2013). In addition, school-based mental health support professionals may assist military youth and families connect with social networks and organizations that serve military personnel (Fenning et al., 2013; Pisano, 2014). These professionals can be vital in providing services to benefit the children of military families.

### Table 1. Relevant resources for educators to support military children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military child related resource</th>
<th>Web address/Link (if available)</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)</td>
<td><a href="https://www.militarychild.org/">https://www.militarychild.org/</a></td>
<td>Provides professional development and support to military connected youth, families, and the professionals who serve them. Offers courses to professionals through face-to-face and online delivery. Published magazine “On the Move”, which is downloadable from the MCEC web site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Impacted Schools Association</td>
<td><a href="https://militaryimpactedschoolassociation.org/">https://militaryimpactedschoolassociation.org/</a></td>
<td>Organization of superintendents that support school districts with a high rate of military connected students. Resources are organized for schools and families, with specific links to information about the Military Interstate Children’s Compact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Interstate Children’s Compact (MIC3)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mic3.net/">http://www.mic3.net/</a></td>
<td>The web site provides information about the MIC3, which is a “compact” adopted by all 50 states intended to ease the challenges of school transitions for military youth. The web site contains downloadable brochures, public service announcement and a profile for each state, including commissioner information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Military Family Association</td>
<td><a href="https://www.militaryfamily.org/">https://www.militaryfamily.org/</a></td>
<td>With a mission to support military families, there is information about the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMB), including links to enrollment forms. An education section provides resources, including content related to MIC3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA)</td>
<td><a href="https://www.dodea.edu/">https://www.dodea.edu/</a></td>
<td>Contains specific information for parents, students and DoDEA employees. Also has a link with information for parents whose children are enrolled in Non DoDEA schools (e.g., civilian schools).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military One Source</td>
<td><a href="https://www.militaryonesource.mil/">https://www.militaryonesource.mil/</a></td>
<td>This web site has a section devoted to education, organized from Pre-K to higher education, including a section on school transitions and youth employment. There is a separate section on having a family member with special needs, which includes information about special education and child care.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and assisting the entire family both at school and within the community.

**Teachers**

Teachers are invaluable in providing assistance to meet the behavior and social-emotional needs of military children, especially in regard to deployment. Teachers are the educational professionals who spend the most time in school with military children. With an understanding of the deployment cycle and its effects on children at different stages in their lives, teachers can better help the children in their classrooms (Pisano, 2014; Sherman & Glenn, 2011) and understand changes in behavior and adjustment across time that might warrant a referral or consultation with a school-based mental health professional. Harrison and Vannest (2008) furthermore provide specific classroom strategies for teachers of military children such as, including deployment in the curriculum, shortening assignments depending on where the child’s family is within the stages of the deployment cycle, and maintaining classroom behavior expectations for children. With an understanding of the deployment cycle and its effects on children, teachers are in an optimal position to provide the behavioral and social-emotional support necessary for military children to be successful.

**Administrators**

Administrators also play an important role in the support of military families in their school. While administrators may not provide direct intervention to military families and students, they provide support and resources to the teachers and staff that serve these families. It is vital that administrators are responsive and supportive to teachers and other school professionals’ needs in supporting military children and families. A study by Tickle, Chang, and Kim (2011) found that administrative support was a significant predictor of U.S. public school teachers’ job satisfaction and intent to stay in the field. Also, their findings documented that administrative support aids in mediating the effects of student behavior on teachers’ job satisfaction. With administrative support, teachers are more likely to be satisfied and feel confident in the services they provide to all families, including military families.

In addition, administrators have the important role of being responsible for providing data on military families under the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that was passed in December of 2015 (Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015). This act requires U.S. schools to provide data on military-connected students to assess whether they are doing well in school or are falling behind (Military Child Education Coalition, 2015). Administrators must not only provide this data, but also need to make data-based decisions in response to their findings. This data may guide administrators to adjust programming for military-connected students, direct resources to them, or to adopt new strategies in order to provide support (Military Child Education Coalition, 2015).

**Inclusion of families**

Based on the suggestions and specific programs that were discussed previously, it is strongly recommended that families be included in school support offered to military children. Many of the specific intervention programs highlighted within this article focus on building family strengths and communication. Incorporating strength-based approaches, such as building communication and social skills into the school environment could be beneficial for military families. The school can host military family nights, provide counseling resources for the whole family, and in general, serve as a supportive, stable environment. Furthermore, it is vital to ensure that the school as a whole understands the comprehensive needs of military families and is able to provide support based on this understanding. The school personnel, specifically the teachers and school-based mental health professionals, are in an excellent position to ensure that necessary supports are provided to military families and children.

**Educational professionals and families**

Astor and colleagues have collaborated to produce a series of guidebooks for school professionals from various roles to support military students, which include a guide for school administrators (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012a), pupil personnel, such as counselors, school psychologists, and social workers (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012b), teachers (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012c) and families (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012d). These guides, taken together, would provide comprehensive guidance for school professionals and families, who take on different roles, but are focused on supporting military children in the most complete fashion possible.

**Conclusion**

With most military children attending civilian public schools, it is important that school personnel, especially school-based mental health professionals and teachers, are equipped with the knowledge to provide supports and interventions for these children. It is important that all school staff is trained in the deployment cycle, its effects, and the importance of maintaining stability (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). As children spend most of their time in schools and as most military children attend civilian public schools, it is vital that schools are equipped with the knowledge and training to provide a supportive and stable community for military families.

**Notes on contributors**

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