



10 Things
Military Teens
Want You To Know

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Each summer, the National Military Family Association's *Operation Purple*® program provides a free week of camp for military youth around the world. Like many other summer campers, these youth may go kayaking and climb rock walls. They may hike and fish. But they all have something in common—a parent serving in the Armed Forces. Most are children of active duty service members. Some are children of National Guard or Reserve members. Some have parents who have been wounded in combat or are battling Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. And some are coping with the service-related death of a parent. We asked them all to tell us the best and hardest parts about military life in a popular activity called the Top Ten list. The messages in this toolkit summarize what they said.

NMFA created this kit to give the people in military teens' lives a way to help them manage the stressors and affirm the positive aspects of military life. These people may be teachers, school counselors, coaches, community or religious youth group leaders, neighbors, family friends, or relatives. We've also included an explanation of points the campers shared and some resources for you to incorporate into your own activities and programs, as well as in your day-to-day interactions with the military teens in your life.

The tips and resources in this kit are primarily for youths aged 11 to 18. Through our work, we found this group struggles the most with deployments, and military life in general, but little information is available about how to help them.

FACT:

An average military child moves six to nine times between kindergarten and high school graduation.

The tips in this toolkit were developed from responses to Top Ten lists compiled from more than four years of *Operation Purple* camps. It is not a scientific study, but the result of one open-ended question about military life posed to 10,000 military youth. Not surprisingly, these kids had a lot in common. The *Operation Purple* program serves military children, especially children of deployed, wounded, or fallen service members, many of whom commented on the challenges of deployments.

Along with the tips you'll find in this toolkit, the best thing you can do for a military teen is know who they are and be there when they need someone to talk to.

Lengthy, and often times multiple, absences have taken a toll on our military youth. They miss their deployed parent. Many feel like no one understands what they're going through. Some are separated from extended family and may be living in foreign countries. Since most military children attend civilian schools and many military families don't live on a military installation, these youth are surrounded by peers from their civilian neighborhoods. That's ok, except when they see news of a roadside bomb near where their dad or mom is deployed and they've got a test at school that day. Or they've dropped a sport because they have to pick up their younger siblings from school, a task mom or dad used to do before being deployed.

Of course, they also see the positive in those challenges. Because they've moved so much, they've learned how to make friends easily. They've seen many parts of the United States and in some cases several foreign countries. Teens are proud of their military parent and proud of their family's service. Mostly what they told us though is they need people in their community to know what they're going through.

Military life and statistics

There are about three million people serving in the Armed Forces. There are nearly 1.8 million children of active duty, National Guard, and Reserve parents. Deployments are not new to military families, but since 9/11 many parents have been deploying, sometimes on multiple tours, to combat zones for months or more than a year at a time. Service members also frequently go on Temporary Duty (TDY), which can range from a few days to six months. Separation has become a way of life for these families.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) states professionals who become "familiar with the particular risks that can compromise a military child's health and development" can reduce the stress military youth face. The NCTSN also states those at a high risk for stress include youth who have endured multiple deployments, those who do not live close to military communities, and National Guard and Reserve youth. Today's world requires everyone to be engaged with the community of youth who support our Nation's Armed Forces.

FACT:

Over 1 million military children attend U.S. Public schools.

National Guard and Reserve deployments have an additional effect on their youth. When these service members deploy, their entire family becomes active duty and they are entitled to the benefits and resources of active duty families. For some, that means their health care switches to military physicians. Everyone's pay is affected. The service member's salary will change from their civilian job's salary to the military pay and benefit system.

It's important to remember that each Service—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard—is unique. Each one plays a distinct role defending the Nation, and each has a reserve component that traditionally serves one weekend a month and two weeks of training a year. Some Services deploy more than others. Some deploy longer than others.

Given the different nature of each Service and of active or reserve status, what these teens said about military life will not apply to all youth equally. Rather, each point is a theme that emerged from their collective voices. Also, each tip is just a start. As someone who works with youth, we hope this will help you generate new ideas to meet the needs of military teens in your community.

TriWest addresses many of these topics on their website, www.triwest.com. For additional resources visit www.tricare.mil.

About the National Military Family Association

The National Military Family Association, the only nonprofit organization that represents families of all ranks and Services and prepares spouses, children, and parents to better deal with the unique challenges of military life. The Association protects benefits vital to all families, including those of the deployed, wounded, and fallen. For nearly 40 years, its staff and volunteers, comprised mostly of military family members, have built a reputation as the leading experts on military family issues. For more information, visit www.nmfa.org.

About Operation Purple

Operation Purple Camps are a program of NMFA that provides a free week of summer camp to children of the deployed, wounded, and fallen. Kids range in age from 8 to 18. They learn coping skills, bond with others who understand what they're going through, and de-stress through the healing environment of the outdoors. Camps take place each summer. The program began in 2004 and served 1,000 military kids. Four years later, through the generous support of corporate and nonprofit sponsors, the program reached 10,000 youth in 37 states and 7 countries.

FACT:

More than 600,000 military children are middle school and high school age kids.

**For more information, visit NMFA
on the web at www.nmfa.org**

“My mom wouldn't be in Iraq if she wasn't thinking of us.”

There aren't many careers where teens learn how to identify an aircraft or explain rank. The military culture is so unique that being part of it makes you feel kind of special. Throw in terms like “American hero” and it's easy to see why teens say they are proud of the job their parents do for the country. Teens have complicated emotions relating to their military parents sometimes, for example, resenting parents for missing important events while at the same time being proud of the work they are doing. Military teens overwhelmingly name their military parent as a positive role model. As someone who works with teens, you know these years can be tumultuous. Ensuring they have a support structure when they may not have extended family or their military parent around is critical. Strengthen the bond with parents with these strategies:



- ★ Invite the military parent to your organization to talk about the role they play in the Service. This can be especially helpful when the parent comes home from a deployment. It gives the teen a chance to show how proud they are of their parent without saying a word.
- ★ Distinguish between the parent's service and politics of war. Youth are able to separate the two and be proud of their military parent without necessarily agreeing with the country's decision makers. Understand that military families, like many families, are divided in their position on the war. Still, political statements can be taken negatively if they are perceived to be “against” the Service. Using statements that recognize the duty of a service member such as, “While our service members have done incredible work,” and then talking about the bigger issues of politics and American involvement in global conflict shows you are sensitive to the division between duty and debate.
- ★ Military kids understand the value of service to others. Develop that understanding by letting them lead a community service event.
- ★ Highlight local heroes like firemen and police officers, along with military service members, to show military youth they are part of an even larger supportive community of public servants who live with some uncertainty about safety and absence from the family. Invite those teens, along with military teens, for a roundtable discussion about public service.

- ★ Create a column in your organization's newsletter, blog, or magazine that discusses military life. Let military teens contribute personal essays.

Resources:

NMFA *Family of the Year Award* – nominate an extraordinary military family for a cash prize and a trip to Washington D.C. at www.nmfa.org/familyaward.

“My Hero: Military Kids Write About Their Moms and Dads” by Allen Appel and Mark Rothmiller – Armed Services YMCA (ASYMCA) youth tell heartwarming and candid stories about their military parents. For more information about the ASYMCA's annual art and essay contests go to www.asymca.org.

NMFA *Very Important Patriot (VIP) Award* program – service members and their family members who are at least 18 years old are eligible to be nominated for the VIP award. VIP winners exemplify extraordinary volunteer service to their military or neighboring community. Nominate a VIP at www.nmfa.org/vip.

We think about war and we know what it means.

“Be safe a little bit longer.”

Most of us only see war on the news and can separate it from our daily lives. Military youth can't always do that. Their parents go to war. The news is real life for them. Deployed parents can be gone for as long as 18 months at a time and serve multiple deployments. With the unprecedented deployments of the National Guard and Reserve, it's especially important for schools to be aware of those teens going through the transition to active duty life and a deployment at the same time.

Military teens understand the realities of war. They worry if the deployment will be extended or if their parent will be different when he or she returns. But they also feel for the parent at home. They may take on responsibilities the deployed parent used to carry, such as getting younger siblings to school and sports or helping with homework. These teens have a lot on their minds in addition to normal concerns like friends, sports, and school. Here are ways to ease the worry during this time:

- ★ Be honest with them. Teens and pre-teens know the real consequences of war, but they can also grasp facts that younger children can't, such as the understanding that most people return uninjured, the concept of just how long a year is, and the usefulness of practical coping strategies.
 - ★ Connect with the parent at home. That person will give you a better picture of what the teen is going through.
 - ★ Understand the emotional cycles of deployment—Anticipation of Departure, Detachment and Withdrawal, Emotional Disorganization, Recovery and Stabilization, Anticipation of Return, Return Adjustment and Re-negotiation, Reintegration and Stabilization—and how each phase can affect a teen.
 - ★ Be aware of even casual discussions about war. Naturally, military youth will take perspectives on conflict a little more to heart when their mom or dad is deployed or fighting.
 - ★ Distinguish between the parent's service and politics of war. Youth are able to separate the two and be proud of their military parent without necessarily agreeing with the country's decision makers. Understand that military families, like many families, are divided in their position on the war.
 - ★ Listen to them. Having a person outside their home who knows the situation gives the youth a safe place to talk about the deployment. Many times a teen won't share information with their parent who is still at home for fear of "rocking the boat."
- ★ Be sure the onsite school counselor knows if a teen's parent is deployed.
 - ★ Send care packages from your group to the youth's deployed parent.
 - ★ When possible, be accommodating with class work due dates. Discuss the student's work habits and work load with their parent or caregiver. There might be an activity affecting their performance that should be considered. However, keeping things routine is often best.
 - ★ Work with your school system to establish a policy that accommodates families dealing with separation good-byes and reunions as well as Rest and Recuperation (R&R) leave.
 - ★ Be neutral. Language is powerful. Using terms like "parents" for back to school nights, fairs, or permission slips automatically assumes every teen has two parents at home or even just one parent at home. Create an environment where single parents and grandparents feel welcome.
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We think about war and we know what it means.

Resources:

"Parents' deployment draws mixed emotions from teens" by Barbara L. Micale, Virginia Tech National Capital Region can be found at www.research.vt.edu/resmag/ResearchMagJan06/deploy.html.

"Resilience in a time of War" by the American Psychological Association - Tips for Parents and Teachers of Teens at http://apahelpcenter.org/dl/resilience_in_a_time_of_war-tips_for_parents_and_teachers_of_teens.pdf.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network – identifying military youth who are at high risk for traumatic stress and information resources for educators and mental health professionals at www.nctsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_top_military.

Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network – researched-based information for parents, teachers and family support leaders working with children of service members at www.cyfernet.org/hottopic/warres.html.

American Academy of Pediatrics – Support for Military Children and Adolescents at www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/index.html.

Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists – a comprehensive guide on how deployments uniquely affect children and teens of reserve component service members at www.nmfa.org/site/DocServer/SOFAR_Children_Pamphlet.pdf?docID=6661.

Learn about the emotional cycle of deployment and ways teens may react at www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle.htm.

“ I hope it’s not
him on
the news
getting hurt. ”



“ It’s hard when he deploys,
so I have to keep busy. ”

3. TRANSITION

We move. A lot.

“Moving made me more adaptable.”

Family and furniture are about the only things that stay the same in a military family's life. By the time the kids grow into teenagers, they've attended several schools, have made numerous new friends, and memorized half a dozen new addresses. Military teens say they like meeting new people and traveling to new places, but they also say moving is one of the toughest things about military life. In fact, military children will say good-bye to more significant people by age 18 than the average person will in their lifetime. National Guard and Reserve families can be on the move, too. When a deployment comes, they may relocate closer to a support network of friends and family for the year. Additionally, children of single service members may have to move in with a grandparent or other relative when their parent deploys. Often-times this means changing schools and leaving friends behind. These circumstances can pose risks for isolation and can affect a teen's academics and extracurricular activities at a time when college is on the horizon.

These strategies may help them get settled:

- ★ Find or create activities that bring military parents, teens, teachers, and other community leaders together. You'll build awareness in the community and show military teens they have a support network right away—they're not alone!
 - ★ Sports, music ensembles, and other extra-curricular activities may be the few constants in your military student's life and a way to make new friends fast. When possible, be lenient with tryout dates and admission cut-offs. Many military families move during the summer and often miss tryouts for fall sports or activities.
 - ★ Help teens to focus on their relationships now and not what they'll lose in a future move. Ask your military student if they're involved with clubs or sports and help them get connected in their new situation.
 - ★ When it's time to move, get their class, group, or house of worship involved in keeping the relationship going through email and social networking sites. Start your own Facebook group!
 - ★ Create relationships with the local military installation or reserve component units through cooperative activities. The military is bursting with professionals using the latest technology and
- medicine who might be willing to talk about their jobs. When there is a move or deployment, you are connected with this important resource and can get new teens plugged into their military resources right away.
 - ★ Schools can create a "welcome wagon" packet filled with information for students transferring in the middle of the school year. Contacts for local resources or even popular hang outs help new students get acclimated to the area more quickly.
 - ★ Start afterschool clubs for kids with deployed parents.
 - ★ Create a parent buddy system for newly relocated families and a student peer support group that matches new arrivals with student mentors who can make sure they learn to navigate their new school and don't have to eat lunch alone.
 - ★ Work with other groups like yours to swap best practices on serving the military community.
 - ★ School counselors should ensure all transcripts from previous schools are current and in the student's record.



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3. TRANSITION

We move. A lot.

Resources:

Military Teens on the Move – Tips and advice for teens, with stories from teens at www.defenselink.mil/mtom/t4_41.htm.

National Network of Partnership Schools – NNPS provides research-based guidance on engaging parents, schools, and community leaders to create student success in schools. NNPS provides technical support for program development to schools serving children from military families as part of the Military Child Initiative at www.partnershipschools.org.

Third Culture Kids World (TCKWORLD) – children who grow up outside their home or parents' culture are called Third Culture Kids. Read the stories of TCKs at www.tckworld.com.

State Department Information on children in transition from a Foreign Service perspective at www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c21995.htm.

Department of Defense sponsored site with sections for teens, parents, and educators at www.militarystudent.dod.mil.

Military Child Education Coalition – provides parents and educators with training and resources to ease students' transitions at www.militarychild.org.

“Military kids have to learn to adapt to new situations.”



“Sometimes when you move, you leave without saying goodbye to your friends.”


4. RESPONSIBILITY

We take on a lot of responsibility.

“Most of my grades dropped because I was thinking about my dad, because my dad’s more important than school.”

When military parents go away for deployments or Temporary Duty (TDY), their family responsibilities fall to the caregiver at home. It’s common for teens and pre-teens to assume at least some of those responsibilities. They’ll even stifle their own emotional needs to shield their at-home caregiver from additional stress. Or they may rebel against the at-home caregiver.

Military youth have expressed pride about gaining independence and maturity when they have to increase their load, but it’s easy for these responsibilities to become a burden. Unknowingly, parents sometimes add to this burden and assign adult responsibilities as a means to show confidence when actually it creates too high an expectation. For instance, telling a son that he is the man of the house is a tall order with big shoes to fill. Here are some ways to help them keep a balance:

- ★ Help youth feel confident in their abilities. Suggest a CPR or time management course. Conduct a study skills class to boost homework efficiency. Appropriate instruction will help them feel better prepared to deal with their extra duties.
 - ★ Watch for signs of stress. Dropping grades, looking distracted or tired in class, and loss of interest in activities can all be red flags that the teen is doing too much. Ask them how they’re doing.
 - ★ Provide practical time management tools like a daily planner or create a fun bag filled with helpful items like sticky notes. Mix it up with reminders to take a break. Nothing says “relax” like an iTunes gift card or trip to the movies with some friends.
 - ★ Let them be kids when they’re with you. Teenagers still have the child inside of them who just wants to have fun. Give them a safe place where they can unwind.
- 
- ★ Ask how their school, house of worship, or club can support the family. Mowing the lawn, carpooling, tutoring, or babysitting younger siblings are ways to shoulder some of the tasks the military youth may have taken on while dad or mom is away. Be specific with your offer. Saying, “We’d like to have your family over for dinner this week,” feels less like charity than “Do you need help with meals?”
 - ★ Keep a list of referral services handy. There are a lot of organizations that offer reduced-cost practical assistance such as finding child care for parents with deployed partners, lawn care, or mental health counseling. Some are listed in the resources section below.

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4. RESPONSIBILITY

We take on a lot of responsibility.

Resources:

Military OneSource – a 24/7 comprehensive, free resource for military families provides referrals and information for everything from moving, to counseling, to car repair services. Visit www.militaryonesource.com.

"The Role of Responsibility – How much is too much" by Gail Pirics – an article discussing how to give pre-teens appropriate levels of responsibility. Read it at www.preteenagerstoday.com/resources/articles/responsibility.htm.

Personal stress management guide for teens from the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org/stress/teen1-a.cfm.

GreenCare for Troops – Coordinates local lawn and landscaping for families of deployed service members at www.projectevergreen.com/gcft.

Our Military Kids – activity grants for children of National Guard and Reservists who are deployed or wounded. Visit www.omk.org.

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies – special section on child care for military parents at www.naccrra.org/MilitaryPrograms.

USA Cares – providing financial and advocacy assistance to military families at www.usacares.org.

Apply for the teen to attend one of NMFA's popular *Operation Purple*® summer camps at www.operationpurple.org.

“ There are a lot of things my dad would normally do, like taking out the trash or mowing the lawn. Now I have to do it.”



“ Mom will be in her room and we hear her crying.”

“Our parents are serving our country
and we have a hero.”

Did you know nearly 95 percent of military teens don't attend Department of Defense schools? Only about 35 percent of active duty military families even live in military housing. Though children of service members are part of the unique military culture, they spend most of their time in the local community. They play sports, join clubs, and even see doctors in your neighborhood. Also, there are more than 700,000 National Guard and Reserve kids who might never live on a military installation. These families look within their community for friendship and support. But to reach our military youth, we have to know who they are and understand them. Here are a few ways to get started:

- ★ Poll the teens in your group to see how many of them have a military connection. You might be surprised by the number. Even if they don't have a parent in the military, many may have brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, or grandparents who are serving.
- ★ Familiarize yourself with military life. Learn the differences between active duty and reserve component service. Look at the uniqueness of each service branch— Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.
- ★ Read blogs and books that have firsthand accounts about military life. You'll be surprised by the diversity of experiences along with the common challenges and rewards of military life.
- ★ Download a copy of NMFA's Military Child Bill of Rights at www.nmfa.org/BillofRights and use it as guide to support military teens you know.
- ★ Know where military teens live in your community, including National Guard and Reserve youth. You can search for local installations using the resource listed below.
- ★ Survey your friends and coworkers. Ask who is or has been in the military. Talk to them about their experiences and ask about their children's experiences.
- ★ Schools can assign literature that examines military life and features teenage characters. Talk about the book with a class or group. Ask military youth for input about what's the same or different in their lives from what they read.
- ★ Educate your group about reaching out to the “new kid.” Military teens are often told to make new friends, but the community must reciprocate to make the connection happen.



Resources:

National Military Family Association – find information on military family life and issues affecting military children at www.nmfa.org.

Listing of all military installations—organized by service at http://apps.mhf.dod.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=107:7:453_955382099448.

Resource list of National Guard Family Assistance Programs in all states—the support provided by the family assistance centers is available for families of all military Services in the communities served. The National Guard also sponsors specialized activities for children and teens that may be an option for families living far from a military installation: www.guardfamily.org

“Military Brats and Other Global Nomads: Growing Up in Organization Families” by Morten Ender, sociology professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Booklists for military families of all ages – check out the sections on books for teens and adults at www.booksformilitarychildren.info. The site was created by a military spouse who is also a librarian and mother of four children.

6. RECOGNITION

We appreciate recognition of our family's service.

“ I am really thankful for everything you have done for me. ”

Programs, praise, & bargain deals for military families have peppered the country—and teens have noticed. Operation Purple campers clearly understood the value of getting free or reduced-price services such as the free week of summer camp. It reminds them that someone cares about them and understands life is sometimes tough for military families. Of course they need to have a balance of tangible and intangible support. Here are some ways to do both:

- ★ Say thanks to the teen!
- ★ Fly your flag, wear a pin, or display a “support our troops” ribbon—then sustain it with actions. Yes, teens do notice.
- ★ Have class members interview and write an essay about a service member. Then share the stories with the entire class.
- ★ Write “thank you” notes to deployed troops.
- ★ Celebrate the Month of the Military Child in April and National Military Appreciation Month in May.
- ★ Donate to a military charity in honor of a military family you know.
- ★ Donate items to local VA hospitals with recuperating veterans.
- ★ Ensure school counselors and mentors are aware of scholarships exclusively for military teens. The American Legion publishes a financial aid guide available through their website titled “Need a Lift,” which lists many military child scholarship programs.
- ★ Support initiatives that provide better education, health care, and recreational activities for military teens.
- ★ Schools, places of worship, or doctor’s offices can create wall space recognizing the deployed parents of military teens. Use photos or short stories to highlight them. It also serves as a constant reminder that there are men and women in uniform living in your neighborhood.



Resources:

National Military Family Association – follow local initiatives that support military families at www.nmfa.org.

America Supports You – A Department of Defense program that provides opportunities for citizens to show support for service members at www.americasupportsyou.mil.

USO – a nonprofit organization that provides morale, welfare and recreation activities for American troops, including care package stuffing parties for those deployed overseas at www.uso.org.

Veterans Affairs facility locator – Find your local VA facility for service activities or to plug your teen into a local support group for family members of combat veterans at www1.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp?isFlash=1.

Let’s Say Thanks – pick and send a free postcard with a thank you message to troops overseas at www.letsaythanks.com.

“Need a Lift” is financial aid guide published by the American Legion and information to order a copy is available at www.legion.org/programs/resources/scholarships.

7. DIVERSITY

We value diversity and new experiences.

“Military kids make friends faster.”

There are nearly 500 U.S. military bases around the world. Some active duty families have lived in popular locations like Germany, Japan, and Italy for several years at a time. Teens and pre-teens may have even picked up a foreign language or two during their mom or dad's tours overseas. Even if they haven't lived overseas, active duty families have experienced many parts of America. The Armed Forces also closely represents the racial makeup of America. Between moving and the diverse nature of the Service, military youth have grown up in an environment that reflects the real world.

National Guard and Reserve teens know what it's like to have a parent suddenly switch jobs and deploy overseas, then return changed and make the transition back to their civilian life. No matter the Service, military youth have embraced the positive parts of change. What an incredible life lesson to learn so young! Draw from their experiences this way:

- ★ Use them as classroom resources. Globetrotting teens can offer a priceless first-hand perspective about other cultures and places to other students. Ask them to share treasures acquired from other regions, countries, or cultures.
- ★ Military youth are used to seeing leaders who work with lots of different people. Tap into their observations and ask them to be mentors. They can help new kids become oriented to the area, serve on diversity councils at school, or help bring multicultural students into clubs and extracurricular activities.
- ★ Include military youth as part of your organization's advisory group or teen panel. As local and world travelers, they bring a valuable diverse perspective that should be counted.
- ★ Help graduating teens who may have spent a significant amount of time in foreign countries research colleges and professions they may not be familiar with. Get them involved in organizations that help them find their talents, whether that be in a military career like their parent(s) or another profession.
- ★ Contact your state representatives and then support your state by joining the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which recognizes and supports the mobile military family and values a worldwide education.



Resources:

4-H Military Partnerships – 4-H has special programs for the development of military youth. Check out the services at www.4hmilitarypartnerships.org.

Future Business Leaders of America – helping teens build leadership skills and confidence for more than 60 years at www.fbla-pbl.org.

MCEC Teen Stories – Watch military teens talk about what it's like to live in other countries in the video Student 2 Student at www.youtube.com/MilitaryChild.

www.Myclubmylife.com – a teen social and educational site from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, where more than 80 percent of members are minorities.

To learn more about the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children visit www.csg.org/programs/ncic/EducatingMilitaryChildrenCompact.aspx.

Military Community Youth Ministries, www.mcym.org, is a nondenominational Christian Ministry reaching out to military teens in more than 40 military communities.

8. SEPARATION

We miss our parents.

“I’m turning into a teenager and he’s not here to help me on my way as I change.”

Military teens said they missed their military parents and in more ways than one. First, service members are gone a lot. Deployments take parents away for months at a time. Temporary duty, training, or necessary separations, such as a family staying behind so children can finish the school year, also bring absences. Birthdays, holidays, and family vacations often occur without the service member parent present. Then, there is another kind of missing called “ambiguous loss.” Returning from a combat deployment, the parent may be a different person. Those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or physical injury may have striking differences from when they last saw their teen. Military teens miss the parent they had before the deployment, but it’s not something they can really explain or change. This is compounded by the natural, personal changes a teen experiences during adolescence. You can’t bring the parent back, but you can use these strategies to strengthen the teen/parent bond:

- ★ Have teens write to deployed parents about their daily lives—what they’re doing in school, sports, clubs, or house of worship.
- ★ Teens need peer groups. If you’ve surveyed your organization and know who the military teens are, create a group just for them and those who support them.
- ★ Use social networking platforms to reach them in the places where they already hang out.
- ★ Tell them it’s ok to ask for help.
- ★ Work with the school to establish times for phone calls if the time zone difference is interfering with the teen’s opportunity to talk to their deployed parent.
- ★ Don’t let teens miss out on special activities or rites of passage. While a parent can’t be replaced, the event can still be treasured. Ask an uncle to attend a father/daughter dance or arrange to video tape special events like graduation ceremonies.
- ★ Include the deployed parent’s e-mail address on your PTA, sports booster, or youth group parent e-mail list so they can receive your newsletter and other information about the activities that mean a lot to their teen.
- ★ Understand that teens facing a parent’s deployment or celebrating their return may need to find a new balance between family time and their normal routine. Follow the family’s lead: be flexible in allowing for absences from activities to accommodate family reunions while also realizing the teen may need time with peers as they and their family adjust after the service member’s return.



Resources:

“Finding My Way: A Teen’s Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma” by Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D. and DeAnne M. Sherman.

Battlemind - a multimedia resource designed by the Army to prepare service members and families for deployments and reunions. Check out the videos, files and worksheets created for teens at www.battlemind.army.mil.

Tip sheets for parents, teachers, and administrators about how to build connectivity for military students’ academic success at www.jhsph.edu/mci/resources/School%20Connectedness.

Operation Military Kids at www.operationmilitarykids.org.

Psych First Aid for Military Families is a PowerPoint presentation geared at providing helpful techniques for dealing with families in crisis. Visit www.usmc-mccs.org/cosc/conference/sessions.cfm and find the presentation in Tuesday’s agenda.

American Academy of Pediatrics developed a site dedicated to the support of military children and adolescence at www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html.

9. BELONGING

In a lot of ways we're just like other teens.

“ Sometimes I feel like I want to quit
and just be normal for a bit. ”

What's normal?

Whatever it is, it's something teens strive for during adolescence. And even though they may use military acronyms in their speech or have traveled to five states and two foreign countries before their 16th birthday, they are teens just like all the rest. They want to fit in, make friends, and have fun. One way to deal with the challenges of military life is to help them see what they have in common with other teens. It gets their mind off themselves for a while and they may even find coping strategies from other teen groups. Also, maintaining a sense of normalcy is key to getting through deployments. Here are suggestions that can bring military teens and other teens together:

- ★ Offer a class about transitions. Many children can benefit from this advice.
- ★ Don't treat military teens differently. Changing your behavior toward them may signal pity and insincerity and no one likes that. In one military teen's words, "Don't cozy up to me. That's creepy."
- ★ Older siblings of large families, single parent homes, or families in rural areas often have extra responsibilities. They could swap stories with military teens about how they juggle it all.
- ★ Teach all teens how to deal with change or loss. Whether it's a break up or a big move, change is a part of life that everyone experiences.
- ★ Teens of deceased or disabled parents can share experiences with military teens whose parents are injured or suffering from traumatic memories.
- ★ Expand their horizons. Do an exercise that emphasizes what all teens have in common. Explore teens' lives in other cultures.
- ★ Create a buddy system that brings new teens into a community quickly. This could be through a school, house of worship, or club.
- ★ Organize a travelers' club. Military teens will make new friends and find something in common with other non-military families who share a diverse traveling experience.



Resources:

Learn how to start your own peer support program for transitioning students and view a list of S2S programs in your area at www.militarychild.org/child-student/student-2-student.

Learn about a successful Student 2 Student program that brought new kids into a community through student and teacher partnerships at www.kdhnews.com/news/story.aspx?s=26829.

Take a course from the Military Child Initiative for people interacting with military youth at www.jhsph.edu/mci/training_course.

Visit a teen social and educational site from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America at www.myclubmylife.com.

Teen L.I.N.K.S. (Lifestyle, Insights, Networking, Knowledge and Skills) – Modeled after a Marine program for Marine spouses, this program has been tailored for military teens. Contact your local Marine base for information on how you can connect a Marine teen with this support group.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America Military Support – with more than 350 military youth centers around the world, this is a place where military teens can feel at home, no matter where that is. Visit www.bgca.org/partners/military for more information.

“Being a military kid teaches you to be strong.”

Strength, perseverance, and sacrifice are words we associate with our troops. But these are the same traits we see in military teens. They send care packages to their military parent when they are fighting overseas. They take on new tasks when situations change in their families. They grow up with a sense of community and service to country. While they do it for their family, they're sustaining their service member for America, too. Celebrate their achievements. Recognize their efforts to the country. Use these strategies as an opportunity to empower all youth and the powerful contributions they can make in their communities:

- ★ Celebrate the Month of the Military Child in April.
- ★ Support legislation that provides new opportunities for military youth.
- ★ Send them to an *Operation Purple*® camp.
- ★ Nominate them for awards.
- ★ Download a copy of the NMFA Military Child Bill of Rights at www.nmfa.org/BillofRights and use it as a guide to support military teens you know.
- ★ Tell them you're proud of them! Sometimes they just need to hear that they're doing a great job for their family and their country.

Resources:

Locate an *Operation Purple* Camp near you – visit www.operationpurple.org.

Information about Month of the Military Child can be found at www.eu.dodea.edu/features/080401_militaryChild.php.

Military Child Education Coalition at www.militarychild.org.

Operation Military Kids – visit www.operationmilitarykids.org.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America National Youth of the Year Program – BGCA members are recognized for overcoming obstacles and making outstanding contributions to their school, family and community at www.bgca.org/YOY.

Our Military Kids - activity grants for children of deployed National Guard or Reserve service members and those of the wounded at www.omk.org.



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