

Helping military children make better adjustments: A working partnership between parents and teachers

Lori's father, an army officer, was recently promoted and assigned to a new military base. As a result, her family would have to move—again. Just 18 months earlier, the family had made another move. It had taken Lori a lot of effort to establish a good relationship with her preschool teachers and friends.

With this new military assignment, her family would have to find a new child care program for her. It hasn't been easy for Lori to warm up to new people. At times, she becomes irritable for unclear reasons. But most of the time she is quiet and does not easily enter or participate in group activities.



When a military father or mother volunteers to serve our country, their children do so as well (Lester and Flake 2013). It is critical to remember that young children depend on the adults both at home and in the classroom to provide a predictable, sup-

portive environment for optimal development (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013). Conversely, young children may display emotional or behavioral problems when their relationship with parents becomes unstable or is filled with stressors due to major home environment changes like moving and deployment. This is fairly common among military service members who relocate periodically. When relocation takes place, young children are required to make significant and challenging adjustments to the new environment.

The nature of military families

The military is aware that service members' families influence the strength and effectiveness of the fighting force (Clever and Segal 2013). Service members are required to work long hours, often in hazardous conditions, and relocate when ordered. The mission of the military depends on the service member's deployments, including the readiness to travel at short notice. Relocation typically occurs every two to three years, which means that military families relocate 2.4 times more often than civilians (Clever and Segal 2013).

Deployment generally adds daily stress to both the service member and the family (Hosek and MacDermid-Wadsworth 2013). Masten (2013) suggests that military families experience challenges common to all American families, like school placements, financial needs, and parenting responsibilities, in addition to the unique demands of deployment to a war zone that civilians cannot appreciate or comprehend.

Of the nearly two million children of military families, the largest percentage is of children from birth to 5 years old (U.S. Department of Defense 2012). While some military households include two active duty members, more than 80 percent include a service member married to a civilian (Hosek and

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MacDermid-Wadsworth 2013). The complex interaction of the emotional demands of deployment, base changes, school and work transitions, and fear challenge the stability of the family unit and its individual members.

Developmental needs

According to Erik Erikson, young children are at a critical time in the development of trust, autonomy, and industry by interacting with other people in a familiar and stable environment (Berns 2013). If this is true, relocation has great potential to place a military child in an unfamiliar and changing environment that can challenge the child's optimal development. When relocation becomes necessary, the primary caregiver can be a major influence on the adjustment of a young child. Consequently, the primary caregiver must be emotionally stable and able to provide special attention during challenging transition times.

Community support, particularly in the person of early care and education professionals, plays an equally crucial role (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013). Positive relationships, coupled with the stability provided by adults, can help children in military families to become more resilient (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013).

Babies may not show a consistent preference for one person until about 7 to 9 months of age. By this time, they often have a hierarchy of preferred caregivers, start to look away if approached by a stranger, and begin to protest when separated from their primary attachment figure. By 12 months, most babies are clearly attached. As attachment theory suggests, when young children face significant changes, those who lack supportive caregivers may be more vulnerable (Berns 2013).

The effects of relocations on children

Prior to relocation, it is critical for parents to talk about moving with their children in developmentally responsive terms. Honesty builds trust, and trust is essential for secure attachment. When parents prepare children for relocation and are emotionally available and supportive, children are significantly more likely to adjust well to separation and relocation (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013).

When relocation occurs, military children are faced

with many obstacles and simultaneously new opportunities. The entire family can experience mixed feelings. On the one hand, they must deal with the redeployment, leave family and friends, make new friends, change child care, and access different health care providers (Masten 2013). Lester and Flake (2013) remind us that in addition to these changes, the family must also adjust to new local customs and norms, including language. On the other hand, the family has the opportunity to explore a new city or country. Too often, however, children are not given enough time to make a smooth transition, creating or exacerbating negative behaviors related to stress and insecurity (Baker and Berry 2009).

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New research is beginning to look closely at the circumstances surrounding the mental health of military children. According to Lincoln, Swift, and Shorteno-Fraser (2008), military children experience emotional and behavioral symptoms that may lead to mental health concerns. The severity may depend on the child's developmental level and age. Just as their parents may experience sadness and anxiety when separated, infants and young children may face similar impacts. Children's behavioral changes may include irritability and crying, disrupted sleep routines, and aggression.

The idea that a military family's frequent moves can lead to behavioral problems corresponds with studies of civilian children, which often find that frequent moves have detrimental effects (Clever and Segal 2013). A supportive military environment can alleviate some of the stresses associated with frequent moves by connecting children to other military families in their communities, by helping parents understand the social strain their children are likely to face, and by recognizing signs of behavioral problems early.

Strategies for a better adjustment

How well young children in military families adjust to stressful events depends to a great extent on their primary caregiver's stability and emotional availability as well as other protective factors that their parents and the community provide (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013). The ability of infants and young children to manage a parent's deployment successfully is highly contingent on the parent's ability to cope with the additional stress and to negotiate changes in parental roles and responsibilities.

Helpful tips for teachers and caregivers:

- Strive to provide consistency in relationships. Consistency is critical if children are to grow socially and emotionally. It will assist in the development of trust and help with developing future relationships (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013). Consider designating one teacher or caregiver as the main adult in the class to assist a child with the new classroom environment. This same person will document the child's daily activities and progress and provide a daily brief verbal report to the parents.
- Help children build trust through daily routines and schedule. Use photographs, puppets, or other props to introduce routines and schedule to a new child in a fun, developmentally appropriate manner. For example, Ms. Johnson may use a puppet, Froggy, to inform the new child about what Froggy's day is like. Froggy becomes the child's *transitional object*, offering security and comfort

through the child's early transition to a new program or classroom.

- Design a project lasting a week (or every two weeks, depending on the content and complexity of the activity) to deliberately encourage social interactions between the new child and other members of the group. Work to facilitate both creative problem solving and an end-of-day evaluation on the project.

Helpful tips for working with parents:

- Maintain a regular schedule for parent meetings to provide brief, verbal updates of the child's adjustment and progress. Include work samples to support your verbal report.
- Invite one or both parents to visit the classroom regularly. Offering a choice of tasks—reading to a group or sitting with the children working with clay, for example—will help focus the visitor and help the parent be more at ease. If the service member visits in uniform, expect plentiful questions and observations from the other children.

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- Use electronic communication to stay in touch. A short text message or a photo of a child engaging in a meaningful activity will reassure parents of a smooth, socially appropriate transition.

Working in partnership

Osofsky and Chartrand (2013) argue that the risk factors most likely to influence young children's development are the stressful events that change daily routines, the frequency of stressful events, and the emotional unavailability of parents or caregivers. Clever and Segal (2013) say that the relocation can be stressful for the entire family. When the service member assumes the new responsibility at a new base, it is highly possible that he or she may be both physically and emotionally unavailable during the initial phase of relocation. When separated in this way, toddlers and preschoolers may experience

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acute anxiety. They may be markedly vulnerable to separations because they are old enough to understand separation and loss but not old enough to have developed much coping ability (Masten 2013).

Furthermore, in the midst of moving and settling down, emotional support and a stable daily schedule for young military children is critical. A welcoming and supportive classroom environment initiated by the teachers or caregivers will send a clear message reassuring parents of the child's continued healthy development and well-being (Floyd and Phillips 2013).

Let parents know that their child's smooth transition into your classroom is the highest priority. Build a working partnership by sharing information, marking successes, and ensuring maximum opportunity for the child's growth and development—socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

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