

The Unique Needs of Students from Military Families

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Abstract

Students from military families have unique challenges. They face frequent mobility, parental deployment, and parental separation. As a result, military students confront some educational roadblocks. They may experience education gaps, and they may struggle to sustain friendships and to adapt to a new school environment. Schools and teachers have important roles in helping military students cope with these stressors. However, many military families feel that schools and teachers do not understand the unique aspects of military life. Schools can assist the children from these families to cope with their stressors by creating a positive school climate and by providing resources and programs to help military students succeed in school.

The military community, particularly children of military members, have unique challenges. Unlike their civilian counterparts, military families must face frequent mobility, deployment, and parental separation (Daigle, 2013). These areas add stress to military life, and adversely affect military children's education (De Pedro et al., 2011; Esqueda, Astoro, & De Pedro, 2012). Various studies have indicated that supportive schools can be proactive settings that help military students handle their stresses (Berg, 2008; Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Cole, 2012). Unfortunately, not all teachers are cognizant of the different needs and stresses of military students (Aronson & Perkins, 2013). Schools and teachers that partner with the military community, by encouraging school connectedness and by offering resources and specific programs, can assist students from military families to face their unique challenges.

The Challenges

Military families encounter exceptional challenges. Three of the most common are mobility, deployment, and parental separation. Military families relocate "three times as frequently as civilian families" (Daigle, 2013, "Key Findings," para.1). Military relocations are also associated with school transitions. Military children attend from six to nine schools during their K-12 school years (Berg, 2008, p. 41). In fact, these are the most stressful transitions for military children and their families. In addition, most military members will be deployed at least once during their careers. These deployments can last from six months to one year, during which families spend no time together (Daigle, 2013, "Key Findings," para. 3). Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, and Richardson (2010) concluded that the longer a parent is deployed, the stress of sustaining a healthy home life increases. Military families also experience duty-related separations. One third of military families reported that on average a military member is absent for a total of 17 weeks throughout the year due to course work or other military-related exercises (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003, p. 281). The challenges of mobility, deployment, and parental separation can be barriers to military children's academic success.

Because of the unique stressors placed on military families, military children are a vulnerable group (Aronson & Perkins, 2013). For example, frequent moves can disrupt education, and military children may experience "education gaps" (Clever & Segal, 2013, p. 28). Since school curriculum across Canada varies from province to province, military students may miss lessons or receive repetitive lessons as they move from one school to the next. Iserhagen and Bulkin (2011) examined the effects of student mobility on student achievement and teacher practice in the state of Nebraska, and they concluded that highly mobile students are at a high risk for academic failure. Frequent school transitions are also difficult for military children because they require making many adjustments. Starting and sustaining close friendships, missed opportunities for extracurricular activities, and adapting to a new school environment are

among some of the adjustments that military students make when they transition to a new school (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Thus, repeated mobility is a common stressor for military families, and it can leave some families susceptible to academic challenges.

Furthermore, parents of children with special needs find relocating to a new school an especially daunting task. School records may lag behind the move and students may not have access to the resources that they need. Some military families who live in remote locations report that it is difficult to receive the services that their special needs children require (Aronson & Perkins, 2013). One parent described her struggle with the testing process after relocation as follows: "I have a child with a learning disability and it took me two years to get him services because we moved from school to school. Everyone wanted to test him, everyone had a different theory, everyone had different ideas" (as cited in Bradshaw et al., 2010, p. 93). On the other hand, some military children are incorrectly labeled as special education students because of military-related problems, although they do not require special education accommodations (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012). Military families with children requiring special education services find transitioning into a new school a challenging exercise.

Deployment is an additional stressor for students from military families. Studies have found that children do more poorly in school during parental deployments (Aronson & Perkins, 2013; Chandra et al., 2010; Cole, 2012). Children who experience parental deployment have tested substantially lower than non-military students in a range of subjects (Daigle, 2013). In addition, Daigle (2013) commented that deployment can cause children to have "behavioural, emotional and disciplinary problems" that did not emerge before deployment ("Finding Five," para. 1). For example, there are increased conflicts in peer relationships when military students' parents are deployed (Lester & Flake, 2013). Students who are coping with deployed parents may become sad and angry, which disrupts their classroom activities. Deployment also places strain on the nondeployed parents. Many nondeployed parents experience depression may therefore not be involved in their children's activities, or may not ensure that their children are completing homework (Chandra et al., 2010). Deployment is a significant stressor in military families.

Similarly, parental separation due to military members' training exercises or taskings places strain on military families. These separations are different from deployment because the military member receives less advanced notice, and the family has little time to prepare. For example, Canadian Forces members have been called to help with the Manitoba floods and the Haiti earthquakes in recent years. Time away from the family can last from a week to three months at a time. The military calls this aspect of military life the "regular irregularity" (Daigle, 2013, "Family Context," para. 8) whereby significant time away from the family is an expected requirement of military life. De Pedro et al. (2011) found that children reported the most stress during these family separations because of the uncertainty involved and the pressure placed on the other parent during these separations. Certainly, deployment and parental separation place strain on military families and present academic challenges for their children.

The Solutions

Schools can be a safe place for children, and they can help children cope with the stressors in their lives (De Pedro et al., 2011). Numerous studies have identified the importance of how a positive school climate can positively impact a student emotionally and academically (Berkowitz, De Pedro, Couture, & Benbenishty, 2014; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2010). Mmari et al. (2010) noted that "social connectedness" or the sense of belonging with one's peers is paramount to a child's psychological health (p. 4). They also noted that schools are a strong factor related to this social connectedness. However, different studies have indicated that military families feel that their schools do not understand the military experience or the stressors unique to their families (Chandra et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2011). For example, only 43% of 19,861 military members gave their civilian public schools positive ratings in areas of support and academic help (De Pedro et al., 2011, p. 606).

Recent research has also indicated that teachers in civilian public schools are not sufficiently equipped to handle issues such as parental deployment and multiple school transitions (Esqueda et al., 2012). Furthermore, in a survey to parents on their children's school climate, military parents "had consistently and significantly lower assessments" (Berkowitz et al., 2014, p. 6) than non-military parents. Schools and teachers need to see their role in supporting military students to handle the stressors in their lives.

Schools can help students from military families to cope with school transitions, parental deployment, and separation, by promoting a positive school climate. In the last five years, there has been research on how schools can effectively teach and welcome military students in their schools. For instance, the Department of Education in Hawaii has implemented a model of practice called Invitational Education (IE) (Berg, 2008). IE is described as the "school's hospitality" (Berg, 2008, p. 46), whereby the teachers intentionally focus on many aspects of school life to make the schools more welcoming places. For example, a buddy program connects a new military student to another student in the school. The school has a lunch club for new students, which has been an effective strategy to transition new students into schools, since who to sit with during lunch can be a stressful situation. The Hawaiian schools also have a parent who volunteers in each school to welcome new families, and answer any questions they might have about school activities (Astor et al., 2012). Schools can provide peer tutoring to help military students if they are performing below grade level because of educational gaps. School counsellors can assist students and their families with the challenges of parental deployment. A positive school climate supports these students with school transitions, deployment, and separation, and it gives them a sense of belonging to their new school.

Resources and programs can also be approved at the federal level to help military students succeed in schools. The United States has endorsed military liaison officers who partner with military families and their schools. They educate local schools on the needs of military children, help the children transition in and out of schools, and provide parents with the resources that they need to help their children to succeed academically (National Military Family, 2014). Canada currently does not employ military liaison officers, although the success of these programs has been documented (Aronson, Caldwell & Perkins, 2011). In addition, the United States Department of Defense created the educational partnership program in 2008. This program provides public school teachers with professional development workshops to educate them on military culture and military students. They have also provided some school districts with financial support to establish new programs to assist military students (Aronson & Perkins, 2013). Certainly in Canada, the federal government should put policies and programs in place to assist military families cope with educational challenges and be successful in school.

Conclusion

Military families share unique qualities and therefore have unique needs. Military families move frequently, and they have little control over where or when they are posted, and for how long. They also deal with deployment and parental separations, which are added stressors. As a result of mobility, deployment, and parental separations, some students from military families have diverse academic setbacks. They struggle to fit in with their new peer groups, and they may feel disconnected from their new schools. Their stressors may also cause students to fall behind in some academic subjects. Teachers and schools need to be aware of the exceptional circumstances of military students, and assist them in making transitions between schools. Schools should be accommodating and welcoming places for military students.

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