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Key Findings and Recommendations of Recent Reports on Assisting Children of Military Personnel

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Introduction

As of November 2010, 1.9 million children in America had a parent serving in the military. Of these children:

- 1.2 million were of school age
- 220,000 were children of a currently deployed parent
- 75,000 had seen a parent deployed multiple times.¹

The research community confirms the experience of these families: “Multiple deployments, frequent moves, and high levels of uncertainty are but a few of the demands placed on military children.”² Yet nearly 80% of the children in military families attend civilian schools, as do 625,000 children of National Guard members and 705,000 children of Reserve Members.³ The civilian schools these students are attending may not be well-equipped to address the special academic and social/emotional needs of military children.

In recent years, efforts such as the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children have elevated awareness among policymakers and educators of the unique challenges of children of active duty military personnel. Below are the findings and recommendations of recent studies that quantify the needs of military children. Studies are listed by date, with most recent studies listed first. **The language that follows is primarily quotes from the original documents—little to no language has been paraphrased.**

Study I: Home Front Alert: The Risks Facing Young Children in Military Families

Child Trends

July 22, 2013

<http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-31MilitaryFamilies.pdf>

Purpose of Study: Examines the special circumstances that characterize the lives of children (infants to preschool-age) in military families and highlights both what we know and don’t know about how military life affects their well-being.

Key Findings:

- The reunion of a deployed parent with his or her family can be accompanied by new risks and challenges—particularly if the returning parent has serious physical or mental problems.

- Young children’s well-being typically mirrors the well-being of their caregivers. When their parent or other caregiver is depressed, anxious, or angry, they are likely to be unwell or to have behavior problems. In some cases, these young children may be at risk for harm (maltreatment).
- A key strategy for supporting the well-being of children in military families is to see that the non-deployed parent has good emotional, social, and practical support.
- Military families are increasingly diverse, and their needs are likewise. Among the circumstances that may contribute to stress are frequent moves, difficulty finding child care, and poor access to health care, particularly mental health care.
- Families with a deployed National Guard or Reserves member are comparatively underserved, lacking the formal and informal supports typically available to their on-base peers.
- Many of these children will continue to have exceptional needs as they grow older.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the health care needs of young children (and their families) are being met, particularly in the area of mental and behavioral health.
- Families need to receive regular, preventive “well-child” pediatric visits to assess whether children are developing appropriately. Such visits should also address factors that may impact parenting (e.g., parental depression, adequate social support) and provide parents with information on coping with separation.
- When services are needed, they should be adapted to better meet the needs of military-connected families. Programs serving young children who have been affected by separation and deployment tend to be most effective when they have a family-systems approach and work with families together and as individuals.
- More mental health professionals are needed in early education settings so they can help identify children who are having difficulties and need additional supports.
- Service providers in general should be familiar with military culture.
- After the loss of a family member serving in the military, continued supports are needed to ensure healthy development and adjustment for the children and other surviving family members.
- The needs of families with a parent in the National Guard and Reserves require special attention. Only about one-third of all military personnel live on-base. National Guard members represent about 45% of the Department of Defense’s total military force.

Study II: Education of the Military Child in the 21st Century: Current Dimensions of Educational Experiences for Army Children

Military Child Education Coalition for the U.S. Army
2012

<http://www.militarychild.org/public/upload/images/EMC21ExSum-091012hres.pdf>

Purpose of study: To develop recommendations for both military leaders and educators on the impacts of school policies, priorities, processes, programs, and systems on military-connected children’s education. The study focused on five areas:

- The unique challenges and overall effects of transition on military children throughout their school experience.
- Transition complexities related to gifted student and enrichment programs, including advanced academics, as well as special needs; available options and opportunities, along with barriers.
- Homeschooling in the military community, including support programs and available systems; also reasons that military families choose to home school, how they undertake the task, and how transition affects their education.

- Implications and impact of multiple deployments on the educational experiences of military-connected students.
- The challenges that National Guard and Reserve families face in regard to the education of their children when their military family member deploys.

Select Findings (numerous findings were made for each of five categories above):

- Challenges and effects of transition (Grades 5-12):
 - Loss of credit can be mitigated by credit recovery classes, especially online classes in which a student may work at his own pace.
 - While schools may understand how important extracurricular activities are to mobile students, extracurricular activities are governed by state associations, thus limiting their flexibility to work with the mobile student. This flexibility has been enhanced by the Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission rules.
 - Children of high-mobility military families are served well by the flexibility and portability made possible by virtual schools.
- Gifted student and transition programs:
 - Children served by enrichment programs often have challenges in transition, as well as program continuity.
 - These challenges include different programs in the new location, having to re-qualify for inclusion in a gifted program, and differing program requirements.
- Homeschooling:
 - It provides continuity during transitions.
 - Legal and regulatory variations between and within states pose challenges.
 - Home schooling parents don’t expect the U.S. Army to support/assist them, but desire accurate information about regulations and access to standardized testing.
- Deployments:
 - Less than half of the students interviewed accessed any type of support program.
 - Schools offer a variety of support programs and services, but educators, specifically teachers, are not always knowledgeable about these resources.
- National Guard and Reserve families:
 - Many members of the Reserve are mobile, and their children encounter school transition challenges.
 - Parents who reported highly supportive schools or teachers also reported positive or no impact of the deployment experience on the student’s education, while parents who reported schools were not helpful or ambivalent to the child’s situation were more likely to express that their child’s education was negatively impacted by deployment.
 - School support differs depending on the school level (elementary, middle, high). Elementary school students and their parents develop personal relationships with the child’s teacher that facilitates this support.

Study III: Effects of Soldiers’ Deployment on Children’s Academic Performance and Behavioral Health

RAND
2011

Research Brief, *How Do Soldiers’ Deployments Affect Children’s Academic Performance and Behavioral Health?* (three pages):

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/2012/RAND_RB9651.pdf

Executive Summary (18 pages):

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1095.sum.pdf

Purpose of Study: To (1) assess academic effects and behavioral health challenges associated with parental deployment; (2) examine programs to support children's academic and school-related behavior during parental deployment and identify the gaps that currently exist; (3) examine the current systems of behavioral health support for these children; and (4) make recommendations to support programs to ensure that children's academic and emotional needs are met.

Key Findings:

- Evidence of academic challenges when parents deploy:
 - Children in North Carolina and Washington whose parents have deployed 19 months or more since 2001 have modestly lower (and statistically different) achievement scores compared to those who have experienced less or no parental deployment. This finding held across states and academic subjects.
 - The number of deployments is not associated with academic performance once cumulative months of deployment are accounted for.
 - While longer parental cumulative deployments are associated with lower achievement scores among elementary and middle school students in North Carolina and Washington, this relationship is not statistically significant among high school students.
 - Otherwise, there are no consistent, statistically significant differences in academic performance by length of deployment, rank, or component of the soldier, seniority of the soldier, gender of the deploying parent, or gender of the child. Further, the magnitude of the relationship between parental deployment and academic outcomes has not changed over time.
- Other challenges children face when parents deploy:
 - Teachers and counselors reported that while some children and families cope well with deployment, other families struggle with a range of deployment-related issues that may affect children's academic success.
 - School staff had little consistent information on which students are military, when students may be experiencing deployment, and how many students with military parents will be enrolling or leaving the school at any given time.
 - Many school staff members had little or no connection with military installations.
 - Some challenges teachers and counselors discussed stem from the high mobility of this population, which can be amplified during deployment.
- Psychological and behavioral health challenges
 - School staff believed some parents appear to be struggling more than their children with deployments, which appeared to underlie many of the challenges that these children faced during these multiple and extended deployments.
 - Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs) may provide necessary student, family, and staff support in schools, but monitoring and evaluation of this program could be improved.
 - Stakeholders felt the number of available [psychological and behavioral health services] providers with training in child and adolescent services is low.
 - Some providers do not have good grounding in military culture.
 - Availability and coverage of certain behavioral health services, as well as prevention, screening and early intervention, are not adequate and vary geographically.
 - Engagement of families in behavioral health services can be challenging.

Recommendations:

- To address academic and school-based needs:
 - Address student academic challenges
 - Address academic challenges related to high mobility
 - Improve the flow of information to schools.
- To address behavioral health needs:
 - Continue to build behavioral health capacity by increasing the number of providers trained in child and adolescent behavioral health issues
 - Expand provider understanding of military culture
 - Continue to expand models for improving access for hard-to-reach populations
 - Consider strategies for improving the availability of prevention, screening, and early identification, particularly in schools and other community settings
 - Improve family engagement in behavioral health services
 - Improve assistance to school staff in helping students and parents access services
 - Improve evaluation of the MFLC program by integrating some outcomes-based measurement.

Study IV: Education of Military Dependent Students: Better Information Needed to Assess Student Performance

United States Government Accountability Office (GAO)

March 2011

<http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-11-231>

Purpose of study: GAO reviewed: (1) what is known about the utilization and effectiveness of Department of Defense (DOD) Impact Aid funds, (2) the challenges faced by school districts in serving military dependent students, and (3) how the DOD and U.S. Department of Education have collaborated on their assistance.

Key Findings:

- Little is known about the specific use and effectiveness of DOD Impact Aid, and there are no national data on military dependent students as a group.
- Military dependent students' frequent moves and educating military dependents with special needs are primary challenges for school districts, and various strategies help address these challenges.
- DOD and [U.S. Department of] Education's collaborative practices have assisted military dependent students, their schools, and families.

Recommendation: To better understand the needs of military students and the effectiveness of strategies to assist them, the secretary of education, in collaboration with the secretary of defense, should determine whether to require districts to identify military dependent students as a distinct subgroup for reporting on their academic outcomes, such as test scores and high school graduation rates. This should include determining whether the Department of Education needs to obtain any additional legislative authority for this requirement, and seeking it from Congress, if necessary.

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¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment*, January 2011, http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_initiative/strengthening_our_military_january_2011.pdf, (accessed September 14, 2013).

² Monica Christina Esqueda, Ron Avi Astor, and Kris M. Tunac De Pedro, "A Call to Duty: Educational Policy and School Reform Addressing the Needs of Children from Military Families," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 2, (2012): 65-70, DOI: 10.3102/001389X11432139.

³ Department of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), *All About Military K-12 Partners* (n.d.), <http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu/about.cfm>, (accessed September 14, 2013).

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