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Upwards of 2 million U.S. children, or close to 4% of the elementary and secondary school population, have been affected directly by a parent’s deployment. Currently, there are over 700,000 children with at least one parent deployed—to put that in perspective, more than half of our states (27) have less than 700,000 students enrolled in grades pre-K–12 across the entire state. These deployments are frequently unpredictable, repeated, and can last for months or even years. While supporting our troops remains critical, we must equally provide support to the children and families they leave behind.

Importantly, with the large number of National Guard and Reserve members being deployed, this concern reaches beyond the Dept. of Defense (DoD) Schools and has become important for public schools across the nation. In fact, only about 1.3% of the 1.98 million military dependents attended DoD schools in the United States in 2009, meaning the overwhelming majority attended our public schools. In the school setting, Reserve and Guard children are at a disadvantage when compared to active duty children in that they have fewer peers that share the same thing they are going through, and they can feel isolated. In addition, many teachers may not knowingly have worked with military students in the past, and therefore may not understand how to meet their needs.

Family instability takes many forms in the military. Parents come and go with deployments, sometimes multiple times. This brings not only separation and a sense of loss but also anxiety over their safety and return. Families can move frequently, either to be near a new assignment or to be closer to extended family for support. Further, divorce is a growing concern. Indeed, the latest casualty of war seems to be the military family itself, as recent data state that 20% of returning married troops are planning a divorce. Also, problems in relationships in families are 4 times higher after returning from deployment. With this in mind, there are three key points to remember with this population: military children are
at increased risk for social–emotional problems; are in constant transition; and they require stability, connectedness, and support.

In general, military children are resilient, especially those with large support networks or living in communities with other active duty families that create a sense of connectedness. However, the constant, chronic transition is often hard to manage. Some of the ongoing transitions include relocation, parent deployment, a change in schools, a new caregiver during a deployment, or suddenly having to live with a soldier parent who is injured (either physically or emotionally). And with these transitions comes a higher risk of academic and social–emotional problems. There are many instances when the effects of deployment on our military children trigger behavior problems, academic difficulties, lower test scores, anxiety, mental health problems, and school mobility. In addition, because deployment is split into three broad stages (predeployment, deployment, and postdeployment/reunion), each with their own unique effects on children and families, the environment and emotional state of military children is often unstable and constantly in transition.

In predeployment, young children easily sense the tension in the family and sometimes assume guilt and feel responsible that their parent has to go away. Further, while preparing for deployment, the parent soldier is oftentimes already emotionally deployed and seems distant from the family. Sometimes, families have about a month notice before a parent is deployed, while special ops soldiers can sometimes have only a few hours. Thus, having professionals trained on these topics within all public schools remains critical.

During the deployment stage, families can wait up to 2 years for the soldier parent to return. Emotions are mixed during this period, with families feeling unsafe, angry, sad, nervous, anxious, and depressed. Some children may be forced to take on more responsibility regarding household chores, child care, and even financial support—often at the expense of school related responsibilities.

Midway through the deployment stage (another period of transition) is a week long period called R and R (rest and relaxation) where the soldier returns home to visit with his family briefly and then returns back to the deployment station. Even
though this sounds like a wonderful opportunity for families to reunite, often the expectations are not met. The children sometimes are afraid of their soldier parent due to perceived personality changes or they feel hurt because they don’t feel like they get enough attention. This can cause emotional distress for the weeks leading up to R and R and for weeks after, which can often translate to changes in behavior at school.

During deployment, the mental health of the nondeployed parent strongly impacts how the child manages. If the remaining parent is stressed, anxious, angry, or depressed, then the children are more likely to be as well. This is evident through various studies, which have also shown that rates of child maltreatment (abuse and neglect) increase during deployment due to added stress. When the home becomes an unhealthy place to be, the school becomes the safe haven for the child and the parent. In fact, many nondeployed parents report connection with the school can reduce stress and increase feelings of support.

The postdeployment/reunion stage is characterized again by mixed emotions in children as well as another transition and period of instability. There is anticipated happiness, joy, and anxiety about the return of the parent soldier. But there is also wonder, fear, and uncertainty if the parent will remember them, or if the parent will be ‘the same’ or different in the way they act or the way they look when they get home. The transition back to having the soldier parent in the house involves everyone in the family changing their roles and this change is not easy.

In school, the reaction to deployment often includes irritability; inattention; low work completion; and appearing listless, unmotivated, and uninterested. The child also may experience drops in academic engagement and performance. These students often show characteristics of ADHD or learning disabilities that result in an inappropriate referral to special education. School psychologists are critical in delineating differences between a disability and a normal response to adverse circumstances. The school psychologist can also provide workshops for school staff to teach them about the deployment cycle, how to support their students and nondeployed parents, and how to connect families with community resources to increase a sense of connectedness and support.
Military families and children need improved stability, an increased feeling of connectedness, and ongoing support in order to reduce the risk of academic and social–emotional difficulties. Schools across the country need to have the capacity to identify these students in their midst (they won’t always reach out) and provide the necessary supports. School psychologists have the skill set to provide the range of services both to train staff and to directly support student success in school, at home, and in life.