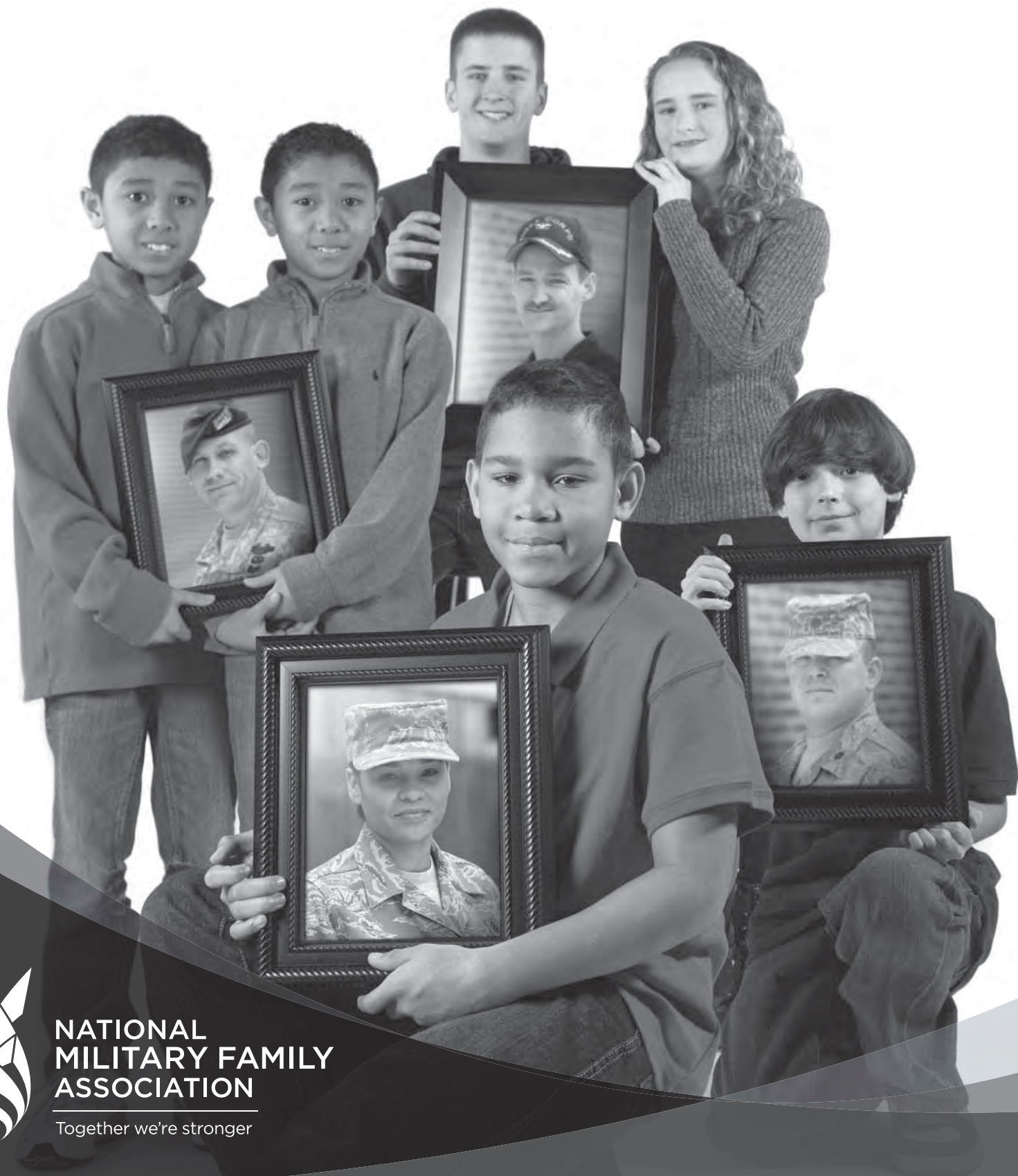


# We serve, too.

A Toolkit about Military Teens



**NATIONAL  
MILITARY FAMILY  
ASSOCIATION**

Together we're stronger

# INTRODUCTION

A recent RAND study commissioned by the National Military Family Association explored how children from military families are faring with the wartime deployments of their parents. RAND surveyed 1,500 youth (applicants to the Association's *Operation Purple*® summer camps ranging in age from 11 to 17), as well as each subject's non-deployed parent at home.

The study found that rates of anxiety among military children—as well as emotional and behavioral difficulties—are higher than the national averages, and that longer periods of parental deployment exacerbated these challenges.

The study also found that the majority of military families are healthy and coping well with the challenges of deployment. And for those youth and families struggling, the study offers hope and cites specific areas of opportunity to strengthen military families.

## Ten Things Military Teens Want You to Know

Each summer, the National Military Family Association's *Operation Purple*® program provides a free week of camp for thousands of military youth who have a parent serving in the Uniformed Services. We ask them 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've said over the past few years.

The National Military Family Association created this kit to give the people in military teens' lives—teachers, school counselors, coaches, community or religious youth group leaders, neighbors, family friends, or relatives—a way to help them manage stress and affirm the positive aspects of military life.

What we hear repeatedly from military teens is that they need people in their community to know what they're going through.



**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.**

# 1. SERVICE

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

Strength, perseverance, and sacrifice are words we associate with our troops. And these are the same traits we see in military teens. They send care packages to their military parents 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.

Although they do it for their family, they're also sustaining their service member for America. Celebrate their achievements. Recognize their efforts to the country. Use these strategies as an opportunity to empower all youth and the valuable contributions they can make in their communities:

- Celebrate the Month of the Military Child in April. A month of celebration in recognition of the children of service members for the daily sacrifices they make in supporting their military loved ones.
  - Support legislation that provides new opportunities for military youth.
  - Make military teens feel welcome when they move to your neighborhood.
  - Listen to their concerns and discuss their worries.
  - Show your appreciation for their family's service by getting involved.
- Along with offering a simple “thank you” to the service members and their families, you can offer to take a responsibility off of their hands, become a pen pal, or volunteer to organize a care package shipment to deployed soldiers.
- Download a copy of the National Military Family Association's Military Child Bill of Rights at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/BillofRights](http://www.MilitaryFamily.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:

National Military Family Association's *Operation Purple*® Camps. Visit [www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org) for more information.

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](http://www.bgca.org/partners/military) for more information.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-service](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-service).

**We serve, too.**



# 2. DIVERSITY

## “Military kids make friends fast.”

There are nearly 500 U.S. military bases around the world. Some active duty families have lived in popular places 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.

But even if they haven't lived overseas, active duty families have experienced many parts of America. The Armed Forces closely represent 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.

No matter the Service, military youth have embraced the positive parts of change. Where many of their peers outside of the military are stabilized in one neighborhood or go to school with the same people until graduation, military youth learn to value the opportunity to see new parts of the world and meet new people from different backgrounds than their own. What an incredible life lesson to learn so young! Draw from their experiences this way:

- Use them as classroom resources. Globetrotting teens can give priceless first-hand perspectives about other cultures for fellow students. Ask them to share treasures acquired from other regions, countries, or cultures.
- Include military youth as part of your organization's advisory group or teen panel. As local and world travelers they bring a valuable perspective that should be counted.
- Help graduating teens who 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 in a military career or another profession.
- Contact your state representatives and then help your state join the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which recognizes and supports the mobile military family and values a worldwide education.

**We value  
diversity and new  
experiences.**

---

### Resources:

4-H Military Partnerships—4-H has special programs for the development of military youth. Check out the services at [www.4hmilitarypartnerships.org/DesktopDefault.aspx](http://www.4hmilitarypartnerships.org/DesktopDefault.aspx).

Future Business Leaders of America—helping teens build leadership skills and confidence for more than 60 years at [www.fbld-pbl.org](http://www.fbld-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](http://www.youtube.com/MilitaryChild).

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-diversity](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-diversity).



# 3. COMMUNITY

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

Nearly 85 percent of military teens attend public schools instead of Department of Defense schools. Only about 35 percent of active duty military families even live in military housing. So, although children of service members are part of the unique military culture, they spend most of their time in the local community. And the more than 700,000 National Guard and Reserve kids 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. Even if they don't have a parent serving, many teens have brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents 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, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and the Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA.
- Read blogs and books with firsthand accounts about military life. Note the diversity of experiences along with the common challenges and rewards of military life.
- Download a copy of the National Military Family Association's Military Child Bill of Rights at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/BillofRights](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/BillofRights) and use it as guide to support military teens you know.
- Schools can assign literature that examines military life and features teenage characters. Talk about the books with a class or group. Ask military youth to share what is 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.

**We live in the community.**



---

### Resources:

Listing of all military installations—organized by service at <http://apps.mhf.dod.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=107:7:453955382099448>.

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. Visit [www.jointservicesupport.com](http://www.jointservicesupport.com).

“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.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-community](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-community).

# 4. PRIDE

## “My dad didn’t just go on a trip, he served his country.”

The children in military families can identify aircraft and explain rank. The military culture is unique and being part of it makes teens feel special. It’s easy to see why teens say they are proud of the job their parents do for the country.

It can also be emotionally complicated. Teens may resent parents for missing important events, and yet they are still proud of them. Regardless of how they feel, military teens overwhelmingly name their military parents as positive role models.

Ensuring teens have a support structure when they may not have extended or immediate family members around is critical in these tumultuous years. You can help strengthen the bond with their military parents using these strategies:

- Invite the military parent to speak to your school or organization. This can be especially helpful when the parent returns from a deployment. It gives teens a chance to express their pride without saying a word.
- Distinguish between the parent’s service and politics of war. Teenagers can separate the two and be proud of their military parent without necessarily agreeing with the country’s decision makers. Still, political statements can be taken negatively if they are perceived to be “against” the Service. Use complimentary statements such as, “While our service members have done incredible work,” before talking about the bigger issues of politics and American involvement in global conflict to show 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 a large 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:

National Military Family Association’s *Military Family Award*—nominate an extraordinary military family for a cash prize and a trip to Washington D.C. at [www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org).

“My Hero: Military Kids Write About Their Moms and Dads,” by Allen Appel and Mark Rothmiller— visit [www.asymca.org](http://www.asymca.org) for more details.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-pride](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-pride).

**We are proud  
of our parents.**



# 5. TRANSITION

**“Moving made me more adaptable, but sometimes when you move, you leave without saying goodbye to your friends.”**

Family and furniture are about the only things that stay the same in a military family's life. Military teens like getting to know new people and places, but moving is one of the toughest things about military life. Military children will say goodbye to more significant people by age 18 than the average person will during a lifetime. Children of single service members may have to move in with a grandparent or other relative when their parent deploys.

Changing schools and leaving friends behind can pose risks for isolation and affect a teen's grades and extracurricular activities 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 teens they have a support network immediately.
- Sports and other extracurricular activities may be the few constants in a military student's life and a way to make new friends fast. When possible, be lenient with tryout dates and admission cut-offs. Give them the chance to thrive in the classes that are most appropriate for them, not just the ones available in the middle of the term.
- Find out if your state has adopted the Interstate Compact for Military Children that facilitates the process of children moving from school to school instead of penalizing them. If your state is not a member contact your school district offices to encourage them to get involved.
- Help teens focus on their relationships now and not what they'll lose in a future move. When it's time to move, get their classes, clubs, or houses of worship involved in keeping relationships going through email and social networking sites.
- 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.
- Start after-school clubs for kids with deployed parents.
- Create 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.
- School counselors should ensure all transcripts from previous schools are current and in the students' records.

## Resources:

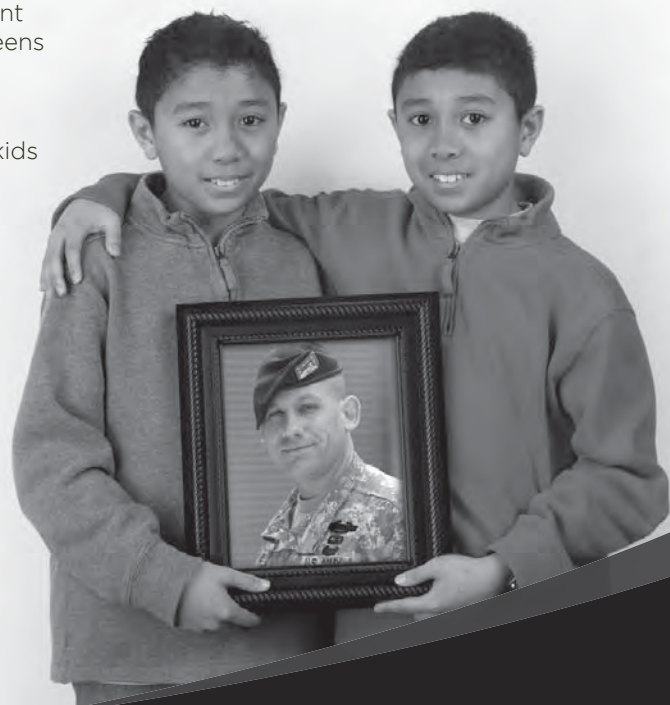
**Military Teens on the Move**—Tips and advice for teens, with stories from teens at [www.defenselink.mil/mtom/t4\\_41.htm](http://www.defenselink.mil/mtom/t4_41.htm).

**National Network of Partnership Schools**—provides research-based guidance on engaging parents, schools, and community leaders to create student success in schools. Find out more at [www.partnership-schools.org](http://www.partnership-schools.org).

**Military Impacted Schools Association** serves school districts with information to ease students' school transitions. Visit [www.militaryimpactedschoolsassociation.org](http://www.militaryimpactedschoolsassociation.org) for more information.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-transition](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-transition).

**We move. A lot.**



# 6. RECOGNITION

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

Programs, praise, and bargain deals for military families have peppered the country—and teens have noticed. For example, *Operation Purple*® campers clearly understand the value of getting a 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 a military 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, National Military Appreciation Month in May, and Military Family Appreciation Month in November.
- Donate to a military charity in honor of a military family you know.
- Ensure school counselors and mentors are aware of scholarships offered to 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 including the popular Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) program.
- Support initiatives that provide better education, health care, and recreational activities for military teens.
- Schools, places of worship, or doctors’ offices can use empty wall space to recognize 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’s *Operation Purple*® Camps. Visit [www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org) for more information.

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](http://www.bgca.org/partners/military) for more information.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-service](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-service).

**We appreciate  
recognition of our  
families’ service.**





# 7. BELONGING

**“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. And even though they may use military acronyms in their speech or have lived in 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 minds 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:

- 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 transition, 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.
- Organize a travelers’ club. Military teens will make new friends and find commonality with other non-military families who share a diverse traveling experience.

**We are just like most teens in a lot of ways.**



## **Resources:**

Boys & Girls Clubs of America Military Support—hosts more than 350 military youth centers around the world. Visit [www.bgca.org/partners/military](http://www.bgca.org/partners/military) for more information.

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](http://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](http://www.kdhnews.com/news/story.aspx?s=26829).

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-belonging](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-belonging).

# 8. RESPONSIBILITY

**“There are a lot of things my dad would normally do. Now I have to do it.”**

When military parents go away to serve, 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 may 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 when they've had to increase their load, but it's easy for these responsibilities to become overwhelming. Parents sometimes unknowingly add to this burden and assign responsibilities to show confidence when actually it creates too high an expectation. Here are some ways to help them keep a balance:

- Help youth feel confident in their abilities. Conduct a study skills class to boost homework efficiency. Good instruction can help them feel better prepared to deal with their extra duties.
- Watch for signs of stress. Dropping grades, poor sleeping patterns, lost interest in activities, and even immersion in a hobby or sport can all be red flags that the teen is dealing with too much. Ask them how they're doing and give additional support.
- Let teenagers be kids when they're with you. Give them a safe place where they can unwind and be themselves.
- Ask how schools, houses of worship, or clubs 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 day care services for parents with deployed spouses, lawn care, or mental health counseling; [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com) provides access to many of local resources available to military families.

**We take on  
a lot of  
responsibility.**



## Resources:

"The Role of Responsibility—How much is too much" by Gail Pirics. Read it at [www.preteenagerstoday.com/resources/articles/responsibility.htm](http://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](http://www.aap.org/stress/teen1-a.cfm).

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies—special section on child care for military parents at [www.naccrra.org/MilitaryPrograms](http://www.naccrra.org/MilitaryPrograms).

Additional resources can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-responsibility](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-responsibility).

# 9. SEPARATION

## “I’m turning into a teenager and he’s not here to guide me on my way to growing up.”

Military teens miss their military parents for several reasons. First, 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. You can’t bring the parent back, but you can use these strategies to strengthen the teen/parent bond:

- Have teens write to their deployed parents about their daily lives—what they’re doing in school, sports, clubs, or house of worship.
- Use social networking platforms to reach teens in the places where they already hang out.
- Tell them it’s okay 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 passages. 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 videotape special events like graduation ceremonies.
- Include the deployed parents’ email addresses on your PTA, sports booster, or youth group parent email distribution list so they can receive your newsletter and other information about the activities that mean a lot to their teens.
- Understand that a teen 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. Also keep in mind that the teen may need time with peers as the family adjusts to 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. [www.battlemind.army.mil](http://www.battlemind.army.mil).

Partnership for a Drug Free America unites parents, renowned scientists, and communications professionals to help families raise healthy children. Visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org) for more information.

Additional resources on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-separation](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-separation).



**We miss our parents.**

# 10. WAR

## “Be safe a little bit longer.”

Most of us only see war on the news and can separate it from our daily lives. For military youth, news is real life. Military teens understand the realities of war and worry if the deployments will be extended or if their parents will be different when returning. Here are ways to ease the worry during this time:

- Be honest. Teens know the consequences of war, but they also grasp facts younger children may not: most people return uninjured, the concept of just how long a year is, and practical coping strategies.
- Connect with the parent at home to get a sense of what the teen is going through and find out key deployment dates. Too much responsibility at home can also affect the student at school. It's important to have that relationship with the family established in the case of an injury, death, or post-traumatic stress. You can offer resources for them to use at home.
- Understand the emotional cycles of deployment—Anticipation of Departure, Detachment and Withdraw, Emotional Disorganization, Recovery and Stabilization, Anticipation of Return, Return Adjustment and Renegotiation, Reintegration and Stabilization—and how each phase affect teens.
- Be aware of even casual discussions about war. Military youth take perspectives on conflict more to heart.
- Listen. Give the teens a safe and welcoming place to talk about the deployment. Many times teens won't share their feelings at home for fear it will cause more stress for the non-deployed parent. Give them a chance to vent.
- Create support resources outside their homes. Sports, clubs, and other activities that keep youth active and connected with other people—especially kids who know what a deployment is like—are key stress reducers.
- Let the school counselor know if a teen's parent is deployed.
- Send care packages from your group to the youth's deployed parent.
- Be accommodating with class work due dates. There may be special circumstances. However, keeping things routine is often best.
- Work with your school system to establish a policy that accommodates families dealing with good-byes and reunions, as well as leave.
- Be neutral in your language. Avoid terms like “parents” which assume every teen has two parents at home. Create an environment where single parents and grandparents feel welcome. Words like “caregiver” or “guardian” are useful.

### Resources:

“Resilience in a time of War” by the American Psychological Association—[www.apa.org/helpcenter/teen-resilience.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/teen-resilience.aspx).

National Child Traumatic Stress Network—[www.ncetsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr\\_top\\_military](http://www.ncetsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_top_military).

Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network—[www.cyfernet.org](http://www.cyfernet.org).

More on this topic can be found at [www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-war](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org/toolkit-war).

**We think about war, and  
we know what it means.**



## About the National Military Family Association

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit organization committed to strengthening and protecting the families of the men and women currently serving, retired, wounded, or fallen. We provide families of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA with information, work to get them the benefits they deserve, and offer programs that improve their lives.

**For more information about this and other military family issues, visit the National Military Family Association's website ([www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org)).**

---

### Helpful resources

**Department of Defense** sponsored site with information for teens, parents, and educators; [www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil](http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil)

**Military OneSource** is a comprehensive, free resource and referral service for military families providing information for everything from moving, to counseling, to car repair services; [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

**American Academy of Pediatrics** site dedicated to the support of military children and adolescence;  
[www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html](http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/resources.html)



**NATIONAL  
MILITARY FAMILY  
ASSOCIATION**

Together we're stronger

2500 North Van Dorn Street, Suite 102, Alexandria, Virginia 22302  
t 703.931.6632 f 703.931.4600 w [www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org)

Sponsored by:  
**TRIWEST**  
HEALTHCARE ALLIANCE®  
[www.triwest.com](http://www.triwest.com)

**[www.MilitaryFamily.org](http://www.MilitaryFamily.org)**