

Helping Children Cope When a Loved One Is on Military Deployment

Megan Allen and Lynn Staley

Americans read the big, bold newspaper headlines: “U.S. to Send New Soldiers to Afghanistan,” “Duty Calls,” and “Local Guard Soldiers Headed to Iraq.”

When these headlines refer to members of children’s families and others from the community, teachers want to learn what they can do to help. This article shares strategies that teachers can use to help the children and families of deployed men and women who are active military or members of reserve units.

“I don’t like the Army, Miss Allen”

The national headlines have become reality in our midwestern town three-and-a-half hours from the closest active military installation, Fort Knox, Kentucky. One day in May, I [Megan Allen] noticed a change of behavior in Kayla, an extremely social kindergartner. She was quiet during morning meeting, keeping to herself when she is usually eager to share stories about

her neighbor’s puppy, her older sister’s boyfriend, or her new bunk bed. My concern increased when she put her head down and refused to play “Slap It,” one of her favorite word wall games. My first thought was that Kayla was sick, but after a visit to the nurse she returned to class with a note saying she had no signs of illness. Nevertheless, I knew something was wrong.

Before lunch, I took Kayla aside for a private talk. She said she was sad but did not elaborate, so I didn’t push the subject, knowing she would share with me when she was ready. At the end of the day, while waiting for her ride home, Kayla was ready to talk. Looking up with a sad face she mumbled, “I don’t like the Army, Miss Allen. It’s going to take my dad away.” At that moment, I understood the reason for her uncharacteristic behavior that day. Later, her mother explained that Kayla’s father’s Army reserve unit was being deployed to Afghanistan for 18 months. This kindergartner was about to become one of the thousands of children affected by a family member’s military deployment.



Courtesy of the authors

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Military deployment

Military deployment is a temporary assignment overseas or within the United States (such as after Hurricane Katrina); during these assignments families must live apart from their loved one in the service. Whether they attend a Department of Defense school on an overseas military base or a public school in the U.S., many American children are aching for a loved one who has been called to active duty in Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere.

For many families, deployment leads to stress and uncertainty. These stressed families may be unaware of available resources within their community, particularly when service members are reservists. These families need supportive teachers and schools.

A safe and caring learning environment is essential for children affected by deployment as it can help them build coping skills.

Implications for teachers

With the rise in military deployments, many teachers are educating emotionally distracted children and feel ill equipped to support the special needs of this growing population. A kindergarten teacher whose class includes two children with fathers deployed to Afghanistan expressed her thoughts: “I feel helpless . . . I have no idea what it is like to have a loved one away or [to face] the possibility that he or she may not come home.” The following suggestions may help teachers support prekindergarten to primary children and families affected by military deployments.

Supporting children emotionally

Many teachers are unfamiliar with the unique lifestyle and challenges faced by families during military deployment. As with other families, maintaining open lines of communication with military families will help teachers better understand their special circumstances. Effective teachers know it is important to provide emotional support to all children. A safe and caring learning environment is essential for children affected by deployment as it can help them build coping skills. Children who receive emotional support are also more likely to maintain their academic performance even during difficult times.

Here are some suggestions for creating a supportive, stress-free learning environment:

- Greet each child warmly every day. A warm smile or hug as a child walks in the door can go a long way in helping a child feel accepted and secure (Waddell & Thomas 2004).
- Maintain consistent schedules and routines.
- Be more alert to children’s behaviors, feelings, and conversations during play, routines, and other activities, indoors and outdoors.
- Invite children to share with their classmates communications they have received from their deployed parents. Such communications may come via e-mail, letters, care packages, or video teleconferences (VTC). Most military units have access to phones and computers, including access to the Internet and Web cams. This technology aids in communication. (Be aware, however, that not all military members and families have access to the Internet.)
- Respect diverse family structures and living arrangements, such as children living with grandparents. For example, address correspondence to “Dear Family” rather than “Dear Parent.”

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- Recognize and validate feelings children may experience during a deployment, such as guilt, resentment, fear, anxiety, confusion, and anger. A teacher might say, “Carl, it’s hard to be away from your dad. Would you like to write him a letter?”
- Acknowledge children’s loss of time with an absent parent, and without judgment or criticism encourage children to share their feelings and concerns (Waddell & Thomas 2004).
- Encourage children to express their feelings through writing, drawing, role-playing, or performing puppet shows. Provide time and materials for these activities, and invite children to share their creations.
- Anticipate adjustment difficulties and carefully observe children in order to design effective interventions. Through observation, teachers can identify children who are experiencing adjustment difficulties and may need additional assistance, such as counseling.
- Be honest about or help interpret confusing information. Teachers should tell children the truth and help clear up misconceptions or stories from uninformed sources, including other children.
- Be willing to say, “I don’t know.” Be careful not to provide false hope by saying “Everything will be alright” or “I know how you feel.” The truth is whatever children are feeling, and the future is unknown (Waddell & Thomas 2004).
- Suggest that, before leaving home, a deployed parent record himself or herself reading the child’s favorite story or singing the child’s favorite song or lullaby. The child can share the recording with the class or listen to it at bedtime (Pavlicin 2003).

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- Anticipate children’s inability to concentrate for long periods of time; plan for shorter activities. Reduce children’s workload as needed. Be patient and understanding when a child’s primary concern is not school but what is going on with a deployed parent.

- Display photos of the deployed parent at work in uniform (Pavlicin 2003).

- Most important, make time to *listen* to the children.



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Supporting children through changes in the curriculum

Beyond assisting emotionally, teachers can help a child of a deployed parent academically by making changes or additions to the curriculum. “My teaching definitely has to change,” one second grade teacher in a public school says. “I need to research the country parents are deployed to so I can teach it in my room.” Slight adaptations to curriculum and classroom structure can help a child continue to make academic progress.

Children's Books about Separation or Military Deployment

Daddy, Will You Miss Me? by Wendy McCormick. Illus. by Jennifer Eachus. 1999. Grades K–2.

Daddy, You're My Hero! by Michelle Ferguson-Cohen. 2002. Grades K–1.

The Magic Box: When Parents Can't Be There To Tuck You In, by Seymour Epstein and Marty Sederman. Illus. by Karen Stormer Brooks. 2003. Grades K–2.

Mommy, You're My Hero! by Michelle Ferguson-Cohen. 2002. Grades K–2.

My Daddy Is a Soldier, by Kirk Hilbrecht and Sharron Hilbrecht. 2002. Grades K–1.

Soldier Mom, by Alice Mead. 1999. Grade 3.

Uncle Sam's Kids: When Duty Calls, by Angela Sportelli-Rehak. 2002. Grades K–3.

When Dad's at Sea, by Mindy Pelton. Illus. by Robert Gantt Steele. 2004. Grades K–3.

While You Were Away, by Eileen Spinelli. Illus. by Renee Graef. 2004. Pre-K–2.

A Year Without Dad, by Jodi Brunson. Illus. by Cramer. 2003. Grades K–3.

A Yellow Ribbon for Daddy, by Anissa Mersiowsky. Illus. by Rey Contreras. 2005. Grades K–3.

- Integrate information on current military missions and countries in literacy, themed essays, and stories (for children in primary grades).
- Read children's books that depict military families as main characters solving problems and coping with stressful circumstances. If such books are not readily available, or as a follow-up to reading such books, the class could make their own books. (See "Children's Books about Separation or Military Deployment.")
- Post maps and provide globes so children can see some of the countries where U.S. troops are currently deployed (but remember that some military members cannot tell their families where they are going). Set one clock in the classroom to the local time of parents' deployment sites. Promote conversation with children about activities deployed parents might be doing at certain times throughout the day.
- Stay abreast of military current events by reading news articles, and watching or listening to news programs. Be mindful of any upsetting graphic images or media bias concerning the military as you read, watch, and listen.
- Involve children in primary grades in age-appropriate classroom discussions of current military and family situations, their feelings, news media reports, or community concerns (Waddell & Thomas 2004).

Supporting caregivers at home

Family members caring for children with a deployed parent also need support. Show them patience and understanding during this difficult time.

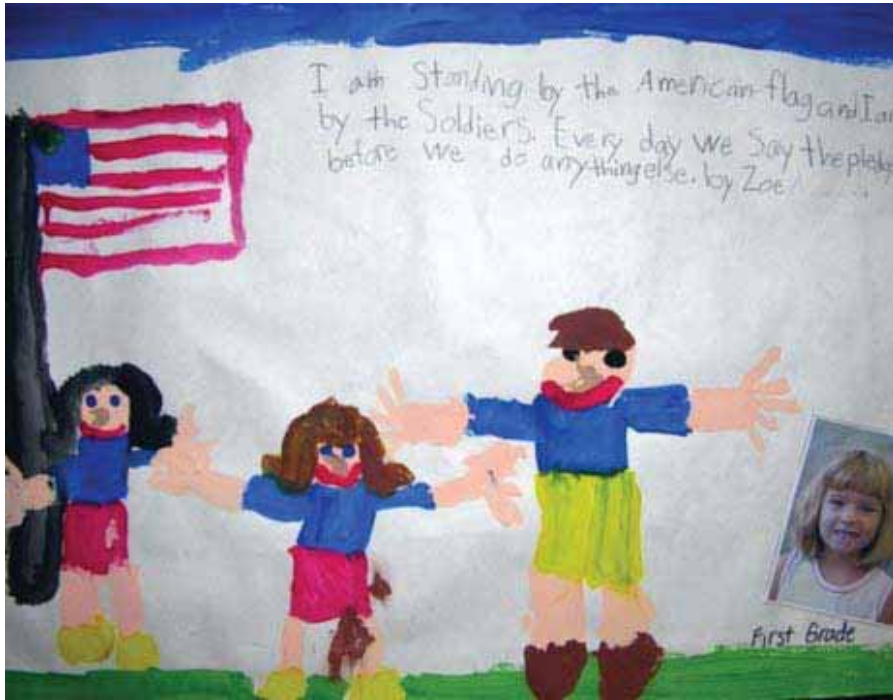
- Remain in frequent communication with the caregiver at home via phone calls, e-mail, notes, and personal contacts.
- Relay information about changes in the child's behaviors at school and/or the content of your conversations with the child concerning his or her feelings and reaction to the parent's deployment.
- Provide all families with your home phone number and e-mail address on a magnetic business card or in another easy-to-find format to encourage communication.
- Remind the caregiver that "it is not necessarily a parent's absence that affects a child the most, it's how the other parent [or other caregiver at home] deals with it" (Pavlicin 2003, 172).

Supporting parents who are deployed

Although a service member may be deployed, he or she still desires to be an active parent. These absent parents need support too.

- Send a copy of the class newsletter to the deployed parent.
- Document school events, field trips, and activities through videotaping, photos, journal writing, and other means. Digital photos and journal entries can be sent electronically. Maintain small photo albums of children engaged in activities at school. Have the children decorate their albums.
- Create a class Web page with updated pictures and summaries of class activities that all parents and other family members can view. Make sure deployed parents have the Web address.
- Allow the deployed parent to "watch" his/her child grow by maintaining an updated height, size, and weight chart decorated with drawings and current photographs.

- Record a child reading his or her favorite book, poem, or story and send the audiotape to the deployed parent.



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- Send samples of artwork, classwork, class books, and letters to deployed parents.
- Write and illustrate a class or school book as a gift for a deployed parent to share with a class or school abroad.

Supporting a parent's return

- Post a countdown calendar in the classroom or on the child's desk, but remember, return dates may change.
- Prepare a class "Welcome Home" banner when the deployed parent returns.
- Invite the returned parent to a class lunch and to observe his or her child in the classroom.
- Remind families that all changes in routine or home life can be stressful for children, even if the changes are

happy ones, like the return of a parent from deployment.

Suggestions for schools

Schools are the center of many communities. Schools support the families of their students, and military families should not be an exception.

- Plan a schoolwide American Spirit Day during which children show pride by wearing red, white, and blue.
- Decorate school or school grounds with yellow ribbons.
- Initiate a schoolwide service project collecting materials for troops or needed supplies for foreign schools or organizations. (A list of acceptable materials for troops can be found at www.operationmilitarypride.org/packages.html.)
- Investigate and provide information on local social services, religious organizations, or state support efforts for military families.
- Establish military parent support groups.
- Provide children with consistent access to caring adults and counselors.
- Set up a crisis team consisting of a principal, a counselor, and a local child psychologist. Create a plan to deal with serious situations that may occur, such as the injury or death of a deployed loved one.
- Establish a buddy system (buddies can be the same age or different ages) or a support group that meets on a regular basis for children with deployed parents.
- Be sure that school policy supports appropriate referrals for educational, health, and social services, as needed.

Conclusion

Teachers and schools play a vital role in helping children cope during a military deployment. Educators can be resources through classroom interventions, communication with parents (at home and abroad), and schoolwide activities. While Specialist Kevin Rose, 138th Signal Battalion, defines his job as a soldier to “fight and protect,” a teacher’s job during deployment is to educate and support (Hayes 2004, A1).

References

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- Pavlicin, K. 2003. *Surviving deployment: A guide for military families*. Saint Paul, MN: Elva Resa.
- Waddell, D., & A. Thomas. 1998. *Disaster: Helping children cope*. National Mental Health and Education Center. Online: www.naspcenter.org/safe_schools/coping.html.

Web Resources Related to Military Deployment

For teachers . . .

Military Child Education Coalition—Provides goals, best practice strategies, available teacher conferences, and teacher suggestions and support. A membership fee may be required. www.militarychild.org

Military Impacted Schools Association—Designed for schools populated with military children, it includes biographies of military children, information on the different military branches, and best practices for the classroom. www.militaryimpactedschoolsassociation.org

Military Student—Contains information, current issues, activities, and printable publications for children 6 to 13 years old, parents, families with a child who has special needs, and military leaders. www.militarystudent.org

National Association of School Psychologists—Read “Parents Called to Active Duty: Helping Children Cope.” www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis%5Fsafety/parents-called-to-active.pdf

To share with families . . .

Deployment Link—Provides information to assist service members and their families dealing with deployments, including family support links, activities for children, information to locate service members, and deployment benefits. http://deploymentlink.osd.mil/deploy/family/family_support.shtml

Military Life—Provides information related to the military family, including current events, parenting challenges, and deployment. www.militarylife.com

Moms Over Miles—Provides helpful activities and inexpensive publications for mothers and fathers to strengthen their relationship with their children while they are away. It also suggests a book of activities to help children stay connected to distant parents (purchase at <http://fambooks.com/kids.htm>). www.momsovermiles.com

Military.com—Contains facts about the five different branches of the military, recent publications, current events, and links to various military sites. www.military.com

National Military Family Association—Assists families through research, education, legislation, and public information. www.nmfa.org

Talk, Listen, Connect: Helping Families During Military Deployment. Provides bilingual resources featuring Sesame Street characters. See especially the video about the deployment of Elmo’s father. www.sesameworkshop.org/tlc/index.php