

NCCTS Leadership:

Military Children and Families

As a group, military families and children demonstrate tremendous strength and resiliency in the face of deployment stressors or even loss. However, there is a growing recognition that deployment can negatively impact these families, who often struggle to meet the many challenges they face both in the military and in their communities. Providing care and support to these children and their families helps sustain our fighting forces and strengthen the health, security, and safety of our nation.

Most military families contend with a variety of deployment-related stressors, including separation from the service member parent, family reunification, and reintegration. Due to frequent moves, many military children experience disrupted relationships with friends, and must repeatedly adapt to new schools and cultivate new community supports. Some children also experience the trauma of losing a parent, or of having a parent return home with a combat injury or illness.

Although most military children are healthy and resilient, some are significantly affected by a parent's combat-related mental health problems and physical injuries, as well as the wear and tear of multiple wartime deployment cycles. For example, research shows that deployment is associated with an increase in child maltreatment and neglect in military families.^{1,2} Children most at risk for experiencing trauma are those who are very young; have pre-existing physical and mental health problems; have parents who serve in the National Guard, are reserve personnel, or have had multiple deployments; do not live close to military communities; live in isolated communities with limited treatment resources; are in single-parent families with the parent deployed; or have had both parents deployed.

Providing care and support to military children and families helps sustain our fighting forces.

When equipped with the right resources, military parents can serve as a buffer against the challenges their children face. Professionals who work with and support military families (medical personnel, educators, clergy, etc.) can also help reduce the distress that military children experience. To do this successfully, providers must become familiar with the risks that can compromise a military child's health and development, as well as the types of stressors that the family experiences as a result of deployment.

Accomplishments and Results

The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCCTS) has made significant progress in developing resources for military families and increasing collaboration throughout the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) on projects related to the impact of military deployment on families and children. For example, NCCTS:

- Successfully developed a national collaboration between NCTSN and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), in Bethesda, MD, to disseminate evidence-based, best-practice resources and clinical materials to providers serving military families
- Co-created the Military Families Learning Community, together with the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at USUHS, to provide training and education on evidence-based approaches to serving military families and assist network sites in coordinating with military and veteran health care systems
- Collaborated with the FOCUS Project, a family-centered resiliency training program now serving 14 active-duty US Navy and Marine Corps bases and installations
- Developed a Military Families section on the NCTSN website to provide an authoritative listing of resources for providers, educators, and family members
- Established an e-mail listserv with over 60 participants to provide a means of regular communication across NCTSN sites on military-related issues
- Launched the Military Families Knowledge Bank, a comprehensive online database of resources, reports, articles, children's activities, and announcements for military families, providers, educators, academics, and policy makers
- Supported the collection of information, through the NCTSN Core Data Set, regarding the experiences of children in military families, including the effects of deployment and parental injury on children
- Organized two symposia on military families at the 2009 NCTSN All Network Conference, featuring experts discussing the effects of combat deployment on military families and children, as well as ongoing efforts to develop and adapt evidence-informed interventions for these families
- Supported the creation of a *Traumatic Grief in Military Children* fact sheet series for parents, providers, and educators. This series was developed by Allegheny General Hospital in partnership with the National Military Family Association, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), Zero to Three, the Center for Healthcare in Schools, and USUHS. These resources have been widely disseminated throughout NCTSN sites and directly to the Department of Defense via the MilitaryOneSource website.

The NCTSN has made significant progress in developing resources for military families.

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Vision for the Future

Given that approximately 40% of US service members are parents, a large number of military children and families are at risk and may benefit from targeted mental health services. Because many NCTSN sites are near military installations, NCCTS is establishing an NCTSN Learning Community on issues related to military families, children, and trauma. These are the major goals of the Military Families Learning Community:

- Provide education and training to all interested NCTSN sites by developing a comprehensive curriculum that will cover issues of military families and children
- Provide consultation and technical assistance to facilitate NCTSN sites' ability to provide trauma-informed, evidence-based interventions to military families and children
- Identify key national and regional partnerships with NCTSN sites, TRICARE, military treatment facilities, medical providers, and other federal, state and local partners, in order to provide a continuum and excellence of services for military families and children
- Extend knowledge and evidence-based practices from NCTSN to the larger community of providers to military families and children

The curriculum will include videotaped presentations by expert speakers, background documents, and fact sheets.

Based on a needs assessment that NCCTS has conducted with Network sites, NCCTS will develop trainings on military culture, the impact of combat deployment on military children and families, available treatment approaches or adaptations specifically for military family members, assessment issues, telemedicine approaches for geographically separated families, outreach methods to military communities, Department of Defense programs and services for families, and family violence and available trauma-related resources, among other topics.

NCCTS will also collaborate in trainings for NCTSN members about ways to become TRICARE and CHAMPVA (military health insurance) providers in order to assist the Network to receive financial reimbursement for their work with military families.

References

1. Gibbs, DA, Martin SL, Kupper LL, Johnson, RE. (2007). Child maltreatment in enlisted soldiers' families during combat-related deployments. *JAMA*. 298(5):528–535.
2. Rentz, ED, Marshall, S.W., Loomis, D.L, et al. (2007). Effect of deployment on the occurrence of child maltreatment in military and nonmilitary families. *Am J Epidemiol*. 165:1199–1206.