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Create Inclusive Spaces

Military families often look different from “traditional” families and military-connected youth may have life experiences that differ greatly from their peers. Educators can help military-connected youth feel included by incorporating examples of military families into lesson plans and discussions of what family might look like. You might bring a veteran to speak to the class about their experiences or incorporate videos with active service members or their families into your lesson plans. Parents of non-military-connected youth can have their children write letters to deployed service members or simply have a conversation about what it means to be in a military family. Even the smallest actions to build inclusion will foster empathy and help military-connected youth feel seen.²



Know! to Support Military-Connected Youth

There are over 1.6 million children who have a parent (or parents) who serve in the US military.¹ That’s not to mention the thousands of others who are military-connected, meaning they have a close family member (like a sibling or cousin) or friend who serves. Military children and military-connected youth face unique challenges to their mental health, often dealing with the uncertainty and stress that come with war, deployment, and constant moves. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, military-connected children have higher risks of social, emotional, and behavioral problems than their non-military-connected peers. However, the experiences of military-connected youth also provide them with resiliency and flexibility that can be used to protect their mental health. This [Month of the Military Child](#), remember that military-connected youth serve too, and use the following tips to support the military-connected youth in your life.^{2,3}

Encourage Connection

A strong support network of peers and trusted adults is beneficial for any young person, but especially so for military-connected youth, who are disconnected from a close family member for extended periods and have different life experiences than many of their peers. Educators can foster connections between students by creating opportunities for non-academic discussions and encouraging youth to see how much they have in common with each other. Simple conversation starters like “What’s the best movie you saw recently?” or “What’s your favorite summer activity?” can open the door to new connections. Parents of non-military-connected youth can encourage their children to get to know and befriend military kids or attend military-related community events to form connections with the military families in their area.

For returning service members, reconnection with close family members is difficult, but important. Emphasize how much you missed your child and how happy you are to see them but remember to be patient. Reconnection takes time, so give your young person space to express their feelings and keep in mind that adjusting to change is difficult for both of you.^{2,3,4,5}

Recognize Academic Gaps

Frequent moves can distract military-connected youth from their learning and development of new skills. Military-connected youth may also be experiencing traumatic loss and grief, which can additionally disrupt their learning experience. It's important that parents and educators know about the challenges faced by military-connected youth and recognize the indicators of a problem. Pay attention to behaviors like disengagement, acting out, excessive procrastination, or spending excessive amounts of time on homework. If you notice a problem, talk to the young person about what they are experiencing, work with other adults in your youth's life to create a plan, and turn to community support and resources that are available to you. Some great resources are listed at the end of this Know! Tip.^{2,5}

Let Kids be Kids

Military-connected youth are used to taking on additional responsibilities, which can be wonderful for building leadership and dependability skills. Too much responsibility, however, can lead to perfectionism and parentification, which can have negative effects on their well-being. Show the military-connected youth in your life that you appreciate how responsible they are but remind them that they are not a burden and do not have to be perfect. Encourage them to share their feelings and experiences with you, whether they are good or bad. Remember to give them a break from their responsibilities and let them enjoy their childhood whenever possible.⁵

Continue the Conversation

Support doesn't stop after a few conversations. Military-connected youth are resilient but are also at higher risk for substance use and mental health issues than their peers, so caring adults must keep checking in with military-connected youth about how they are doing and what they need. These conversations might be about difficult topics, like war, trauma, and grief, but the more you open the door for discussion, the more likely your youth will be to share their feelings and experiences with you. Use the resources listed in this tip to guide your discussions and keep supporting the military-connected youth in your life.

[Superscript sources are hyperlinked at the start of this document](#)

For additional Know! Prevention Tips for Everyone, scan the QR code:



Resources

[Helping Children Deal With Deployment | Mental Health America \(mhanational.org\)](#)

[Reconnecting With Your Children | Mental Health America \(mhanational.org\)](#)

[Helping Children Cope With Tragedy Related Anxiety | Mental Health America \(mhanational.org\)](#)

[Talking to Children about War | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)

[Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: For Military Parents and Caregivers | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)

[Understanding Youth Substance Use: For Military Parents and Caregivers | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)

[Working Effectively with Military Families: 10 Key Concepts All Providers Should Know | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)

[Child-Friendly Resources for Military Families - Sesame Workshop](#)

[Military-Connected Youth \(edtechbooks.org\)](#)

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