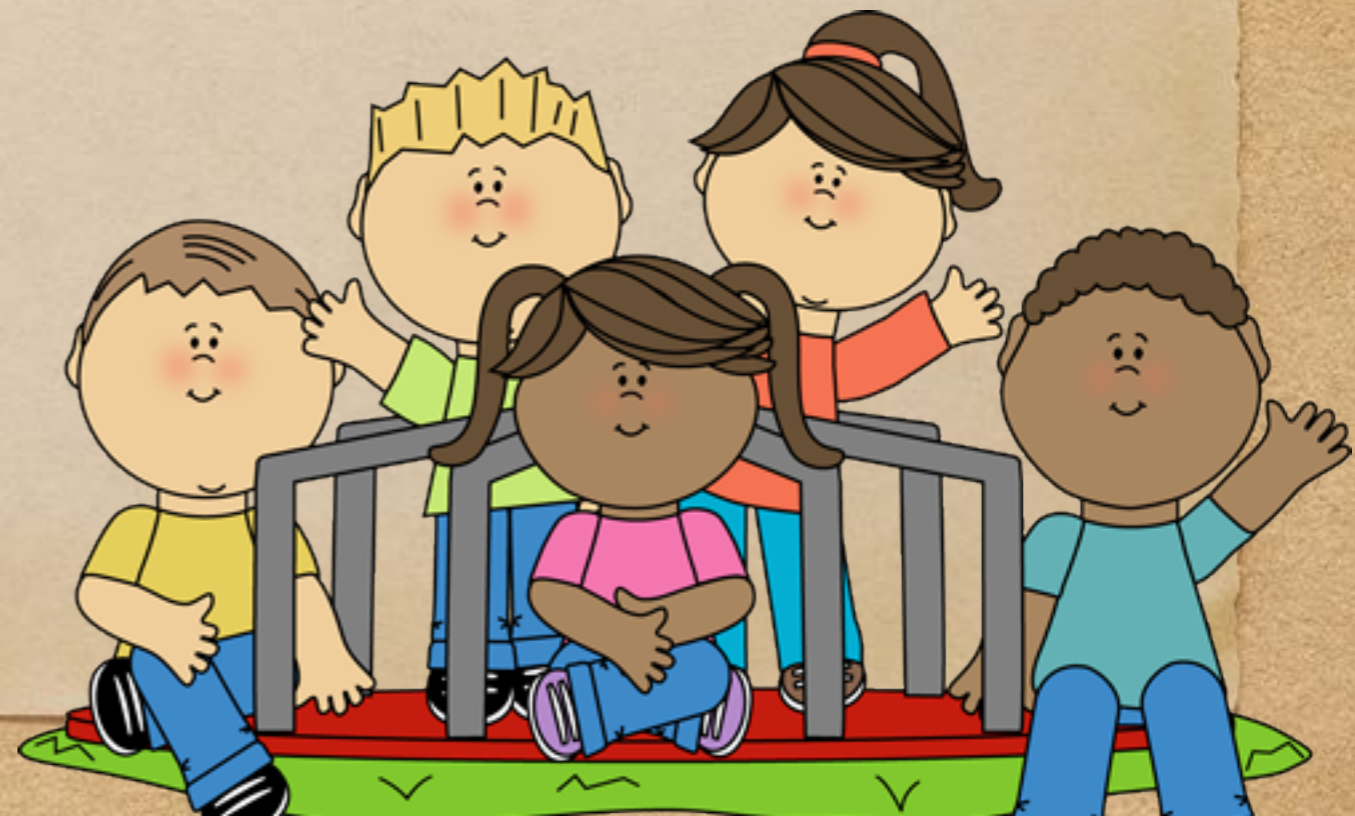


# Children of Military Divorce

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- ◆ **Currently around 1.2 million military children of active duty members worldwide ([aasa.com](http://aasa.com)).**
- ◆ **Most are in early and middle school: 78% under age eleven; 80% under the age of 15 ([aasa.com](http://aasa.com)).**
- ◆ **Mostly Caucasian (70.5 %), but 15.5% are African-American (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009).**
- ◆ **80% attend U.S. public schools ([aasa.com](http://aasa.com)).**

# **What makes them so special?**

- ◆ **Over 2 million U.S. children have a parent who has served in Iraq or Afghanistan (Walters, Jennifer, “12 Things You Didn’t Know About Military Families,”).**
- ◆ **Deployments typically last 1 year, but usually are repeated.**
- ◆ **Average military family moves every 2 to 3 years.**
- ◆ **Average child attends six to nine schools (Walters).**

# Advantages and Disadvantages of a Military Childhood

- ♦ Pat Conroy, author of The Great Santini and The Prince of Tides, a military child himself, wrote that “being a military brat is one of the strangest and most interesting ways to spend an American childhood.” (Wertsch, Mary Edwards, Army Brats, 1991).
- ♦ Children who grow up in the military experience both exciting and heart-breaking childhoods, filled with adventure and community and tremendous loss and worry.
- ♦ “Military life for most kids is exciting....many people can’t imagine their lives without the frequent moves and unique experiences that being in the military provides them with. Being a military kid is an adventure! (Tamblyn, Rebecca, “The Pros and Cons of Being a Military Brat,” The WP Wire, December, 10, 2013).
- ♦ Another view: “I am a military brat...honestly, I absolutely hate it....Do you know how many friends I have lost? I have become even more of an introvert...and have been diagnosed with depression....I don’t have a place to call home....Nothing is stable. (Currie, Cat, The WPWire, December 10, 2013).

# **Clearly there are two sides to every coin and more than two ways to look at a military childhood**

- ♦ **Military brats, a term used affectionately by many military children, are “strong and...resilient. They are adaptable....They have advantages many kids do not: parents with jobs and steady incomes, health care, safe housing, good education systems and access to early intervention programs.” (Collins, Elizabeth, Soldiers magazine, May 1, 2015).**
- ♦ **However, as Ms. Collins goes on to point out, growing up is hard for every child and it can become much more difficult when kids have to move every few years and their parents are absent for large expanses of their childhood years. It is even more of a challenge when parents are injured during their deployments and/or develop post traumatic stress disorders. (Collins, 2015).**

# **What are the variables that make the military childhood positive for many, but isolating and lonesome for others?**

- ◆ **First: Having parents the work together to make the frequent moves and worrisome deployments as easy as possible for the children.**
- ◆ **These parents may see the separations and relocations as part of an adventure or a life plan. It can be exciting to see new countries and diverse cultures and doing so usually has broadening effect on the children.**
- ◆ **But...if one of the spouses wants to settle down in one place, military life is going to be a challenge for that spouse and for the children. If the parent left behind by deployment is unhappy and depressed, he/she will not have the mental health necessary to ensure that the children have the support they need.**
- ◆ **For children off base: harder to establish friendships, cliques formed - people are different**

- ◆ **Second variable: the base or post**
- ◆ **The armed services try very hard to make sure families and service members are provided with resources necessary for enjoyable life.**
- ◆ **“A military base or post is a community within a community. It’s fenced off from the civilian world around it - a sanctuary for military families filled with bowling alleys, sports fields, restaurants,...golf course, walking trails, schools...and lots more.” (Tracy, David, “What It’s Like Growing Up As a Military Brat.” FoxtrotALPHA, 8/12/15).**
- ◆ **Military children who live on base are not just part of a military family, they are part of *the* military family, because people in the community look out for one another and friendships are strong. (Tracy, 2015).**
- ◆ **For children who live off base: much more difficult to make friends, less support, in school and out, people's lives seem different. Resources are not as readily available, including recreational, medical, counseling.**

# The Difficulties of Deployment for Children

- ◆ Deployment - especially repeated - adds to distress of military children.
- ◆ Signs of distress: An increase in depression and anxiety, decrease in academic performance, for some, an increase in use of drugs and alcohol. (Collins, Elizabeth, "The Mental Health of Military Children," Soldiers magazine, May 1, 2015).
- ◆ Warning signs of stress: differ according to age, gender, circumstances - but include: development regressions, such as bedwetting in small children, a lack of interest in formerly favorite activities, risk-taking behaviors in teenagers (sex, alcohol, drugs, inappropriate friends). (Collins, 2015).
- ◆ Additional signs of anxiety: separation anxiety, excessive worry, fears for health of at home parent, sleep problems, frequent physical complaints.



- ♦ **All of these may be routine during early deployment.**
- ♦ **Most domestic mediators will recognize these behaviors as frequently occurring in the children of divorcing military families.**
- ♦ **If they persist, get worse, or are extreme: parents should seek help to discern if additional intervention is needed.**

# The Wounded Parent

- ◆ **When parents return from deployment with wounds, PTSD, depression, and/or traumatic brain injuries - it can have a devastating effect on children.**
- ◆ **The whole family may be in upheaval and children are left to fend for themselves emotionally.**
- ◆ **These “disorders specifically change parents in ways that can be confusing or complicating for both spouses and children,” says Dr. Stephen Cozza, a professor of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University, Bethesda, Maryland. (Collins, 2015).**
- ◆ **Parents may be, “more gruff or less-engaged, more avoidant, more reactive, getting angry or impulsive.” (Collins, 2015).**
- ◆ **Dr. Cozza believes that parents who have had combat stress should seek counseling for self and the entire family. (Ibid). Few do.**

- ♦ ***How do kids handle these behaviors and stressors?* Experts agree that such stressors as mental health problems in a parent, deployment, or family moves are handled by the children about as well as the parents in the situation do.**
- ♦ **“Parents who are managing those transitions well, typically help their children do well.” (Cozza, in Collins, 2015).**
- ♦ **Parents who are overwhelmed, worried, stressed or depressed are going to convey those feelings to their children - even if they try to hide them.**
- ♦ **It should not be surprising that parents who report significant stress in these situations are more likely to have children who are at risk for psychological and behavioral problems. (“How Deployment Stress Affects Children and Families: Research Findings, PTSD: National Center for PTSD, 2008).**

# **Distressed Behaviors in Divorcing Families**

- ◆ **We know well the behaviors that often result when divorcing parents have a high level of conflict in their relationship.**
- ◆ **The signs of distress are almost identical to those of the military child trying to cope with isolation, worries over deployment, and fear or anger about an injured or changed parent: developmental regression, withdrawal, interrupted sleeping and eating patterns, anxiety, displays of anger or aggression, declining grades, anti-social behavior, early sexual acting out, and sometimes drugs and alcohol.**
- ◆ **It makes sense: these are reactions to isolation, fear, and loss.**
- ◆ **Divorce and deployment, and severe parental injury are all potential root causes of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation in children.**

# ***I contend that...***

- ◆ **These military children of divorce are doubly traumatized by the turmoil in their lives.**
- ◆ **But, where the active military family is surrounded by the resources and support of the military community, the divorcing military family is often alone and isolated, especially when the parents leave the military.**

# Divorce Demographics

- ◆ Further evidence of the support the military community provides:
- ◆ Couples currently in the military are less likely to divorce than those who are not in the military - but veterans who have left the military are *three* times as likely to be divorced as those who have never served. (Clever, Molly, and Segal, David, “The Demographics of Military Children and Families,” Pg.21, Vol. 23, No. 2, Fall, 2013).
- ◆ Research shows: the military environment actually shield families from some of the stresses that lead to divorce, but once the veteran leaves, there are fewer protective influences. (Clever and Segal, 2013).
- ◆ Another possible factor influencing higher divorce rate: economic stability.
- ◆ The steady paycheck and housing guarantee may be compromised after enlistment ends.

- ♦ **Most active duty personnel (83%) are enlisted people.**
- ♦ **The average enlistment period is seven years. In 2011, 184,000 people left the military, along with approximately 1.4 family members each: 250,000 people became veteran family members that year. (Clever and Segal, 2013).**
- ♦ **All of the breadwinners of these exiting families were looking for employment.**
- ♦ **The skills military personnel learn during their enlistment helps them to secure jobs - but unemployment is a major problem for former military members. “Veteran unemployment is highest among males aged 18 to 34, and both male and female veterans are less likely than their civilian peers to have a job.” (Clever and Segal, 2013).**
- ♦ **These young parents who experienced deployment, possible injury and/or combat stress and who are now leaving the military, looking for work, and getting divorced - are often our mediation and legal clients.**

# What We Can Do

- ♦ **All of these stressors of military life: frequent moves, parental deployment, injured parents, distressed parents, financial instability, and divorce take a major toll on the children of the military.**
- ♦ **Other factors, too numerous to discuss: alcohol abuse, substance abuse, domestic violence, infidelity, and pre-existing mental health problems - are certainly existent in many divorcing families.**
- ♦ **No research shows the prevalence in military families, but information from clients indicates that military families have their share of these problems.**
- ♦ **The issue is not just that these families are suffering and hurting greatly; the issue is that mediators and family attorneys are some of the service providers that can do something to help these families.**



- ♦ **When a parent seems overwhelmed with the stress of divorce - we can provide referral sources to give that parent some support.**
- ♦ **If parents mention that a child is kicking and biting other children or the teacher at school and the parents don't know what to do - the mediator or attorney can ask if the parents would like a list of resources that might help them to better address the issue.**
- ♦ **We can listen a little bit more closely to cries for help that may be coming from these families.**
- ♦ **It is not our main job, but providing referral resource assistance is something we can do and should do.**
- ♦ **Otherwise, these families may be totally alone, with no means of emotional support.**