



BEHIND THE CAMOUFLAGE

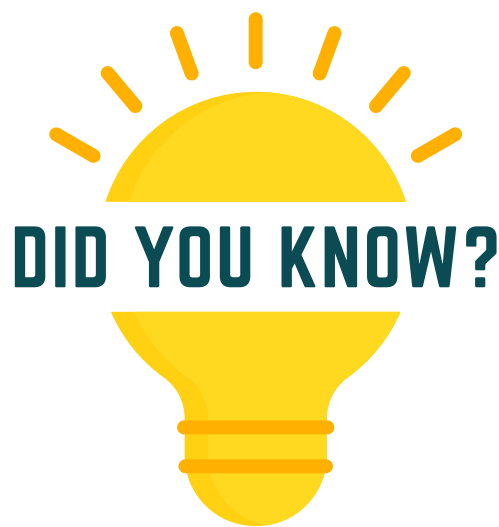
A MARINE CORPS ASSOCIATION INITIATIVE

Supporting Military- Connected Children's Mental Health

with Marta Sullivan, Heather Escamilla,
and Dr. Monica Reintjes

Military kids are part of a unique. The struggles they face are many (e.g. relocations, separations due to deployments, and constant change).

These experiences shape them but also bring mental health challenges that parents and caregivers need to recognize and address.



- Military-connected children experience **higher rates of anxiety and depression** than their civilian peers. (*Creech et al., 2014; Lester & Flake, 2013*)
- Frequent moves and deployments can impact
 - **academic performance,**
 - **social skills,**
 - **and emotional well-being.**

Recognizing Signs of Mental Health Struggles

Younger Kids

- separation anxiety
- clinginess
- regression (e.g., *bedwetting*)



School-aged Kids

- withdrawal
- irritability
- trouble focusing
- academic decline



Teens

- Risk-taking behaviors
- isolation
- mood swings



Younger kids might show signs of separation anxiety, especially around deployment times, while adolescents may exhibit riskier behaviors or isolation as a response to stress (*Chartrand, 2008*).



Parent Tip: Create a “*feelings check*” as a daily habit where kids can rate their mood or describe how they’re feeling.



Evidence Insight: Open, consistent communication buffers the effects of deployment stress (*Louie & Cromer, 2014*).

Building Resilience in Military-Connected Kids

Key Strategies for Emotional Strength



Teach Emotional Regulation

- deep breathing
- journaling
- “bubble breathing”



Encourage Social Connections

- Join clubs or sports
- Keep virtual friendships



Promote a Growth Mindset

- Celebrate adaptability and new experiences



Evidence Insight: Kids who develop strong coping skills & peer connections have better long-term mental health (*Lester et al., 2013*).

Advocating for Your Child at School and Home

Working with Schools



Inform teachers and counselors about military-related stress

For example:

Request school adjustments or counseling for children struggling with the effects of recent moves or deployments.



Ask about **504 Plans** or **IEPs** for academic support

At-Home Support



Model healthy coping strategies as a parent



During times of separation or transition, routines provide a sense of security. Keep routines as consistent as possible, like meal times or nightly check-ins.



Evidence Insight: Strong support networks & consistent routines improve mental health outcomes in military kids (*Chandra et al., 2011*).

Practical Tools and Resources

Deployment Toolkit for Kids

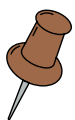
- Comfort items (*stuffed animal, photos*)
- Journaling tools for expressing emotions
- Connection schedule to talk to deployed parents

Community Resources

- Military OneSource
 - Offers confidential, non-medical counseling for military children, as well as resources for family support.
- Family Readiness Groups
 - These groups offer peer support and often host events for children and families.

Daily “Resilience Routine”

- Integrate small habits like gratitude exercises
- A “one good thing” discussion at the dinner table
- Reading books about resilience.



Evidence Insight: Community support programs significantly reduce stress in military children (*Lester & Flake, 2013*).

Key Takeaways and Encouragement for Military Families



Recognize early signs of mental health struggles



Foster resilience through emotional regulation
and peer connections



Advocate for your child at school and home



Use available military support resources and
establish routines that provide stability and
security



Military life isn't easy—we all know that firsthand. But with the right tools and support, our kids can do more than just get by; they can truly thrive. As their parents, we're the foundation for their skill building.

Dr. Monica Reintjes, PhD, LPC, RPT



Evidence-Based Resources for Families

- Creech et al. (2014). Mental health issues in children of military families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 70(10), 933–945. *Creech, S. K., et al. (2014). Mental health issues in children of military families. Journal of Clinical Psychology.*
- *Lester, P., & Flake, E. (2013). Family resilience in military children and families. American Psychologist, 68(8), 703–714.* Creech, S. K., et al. (2014). Mental health issues in children of military families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology.*
- *Chandra, A., et al. (2011). Children on the homefront: The experience of children from military families. Pediatrics.*
- *Chartrand, M., et al. (2008) Effect of Parents' Wartime Deployment on the Behavior of Young Children in Military Families. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.;162(11):1009–1014.*