

CHAPTER 1

Strengths and Needs of Military Youth and Their Families in Schools

The Role of School Psychologists

PREVALENCE OF SCHOOL-AGE MILITARY YOUTH

There are over 2 million active-duty and selected reserve military members who make enormous personal sacrifices to protect our safety, as do the over 2.7 million military family members who include spouses, children, and adult dependents (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2016). Over 40% of military personnel have children (U.S. DoD, 2016). A demographics profile of school-age military children and their families includes the following detailed statistics:

- Military youth are found across all grade levels, with most being under age 5 (42.2%). Nearly 32% of military children are between the ages of 6 and 11, and nearly 22% are adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 (DoD, 2016).
- According to the School Superintendents Association (2019), there are 1.4 million estimated active-duty military members and roughly 810,000 individuals in the National Guard and Reserves. Families in the National Guard and Reserves do not typically live in proximity to military bases, and, as a result, do not have the same access to military supports as do active military personnel (School Superintendents Association, 2019).
- Among selected reserve members, over 32.5% are married with children, and 9.1% are single parents. Specific to selected reserve members, school-age children constitute the highest percentage of dependent children (31.2%), followed by children ages 5 and younger (31.2%) and adolescents (27%).
- Military youth are most likely to attend Civilian public schools rather than DoD-

operated schools (Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esqueda, & Benbenishty, 2013; De Pedro, et al. 2011). In Civilian public schools, there may not be an awareness among school personnel that their students include military youth, which elevates the risk that these youth are not being properly educated and supported.

MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS OF SERVICE MEMBERS WITH FAMILIES

Modern-day military families who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced the most frequent and longest deployments since World War II (Chandra et al., 2011, as cited in Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011). The “new normal” of frequent and lengthy deployments has implications that have yet to be understood for military youth and their families.

- Nearly half of military parents serving in these wars have had at least two deployments (Lester et al., 2013).
- The long-term outcome of these extensive deployments for today’s military youth and their families is largely unknown (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009), particularly with respect to school-related success (Astor et al., 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011).

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS IN SUPPORTING MILITARY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Arguably, the most prolific military researchers whose work has direct implications for school-based professionals have been affiliated with the consortium *Building Capacity and Welcoming Practices in Military-Connected Schools* at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work (Astor et al., 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011). The collective work of these researchers is contained in four practical guides about the education of military youth (Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, Pineda, & Atuel, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). There are guides written specifically for teachers (Astor et al., 2012a), school administrators (Astor et al., 2012b), and pupil services personnel (e.g., psychologists, social workers, and counselors; Astor et al., 2012c). There is also a specific guide for military families, which offers recommendations for supporting them as advocates for their children’s education (Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, Pineda, & Atuel, 2012d).

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SUPPORTING MILITARY YOUTH AND FAMILIES

School psychologists are in a unique position to build upon the important work being done by other mental and behavioral mental health professionals (Astor et al., 2013; De Pedro

et al., 2011) since they work in all types of schools, particularly in Civilian schools where most military children are educated (Astor et al., 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011). Given their training in areas such as family–school collaboration, mental health, diverse preventive and responsive services, problem solving, interventions, systems of support, data-based decision making, and program evaluation (Skalski et al., 2015), school psychologists are ideally qualified to take a *strengths-based/resiliency approach within a multi-tiered framework* in providing comprehensive supports to military youth and their families.

FEATURES OF A STRENGTHS-BASED/RESILIENCY APPROACH

Strengths-Based Approach

I argue for a strengths-based approach in supporting military families because although this approach is understudied in the literature, military families and their school-age children possess many strengths and assets that need to be understood by school psychologists and other school-based professionals (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Zaff, & Lerner, 2009). Military family strengths and assets include the ability to maintain emotional family closeness despite separation, their sense of honor and duty, and their values (Lerner et al., 2009). The strengths can be enhanced through community, school, and family resources that align with these assets (Lerner et al., 2009). School psychologists can provide a valuable service by helping military families, who may have just moved into a community, to access such resources. Military youth show other strengths that include a greater respect for authority and an openness to differences that may materialize as a willingness to make friends at school with those viewed as different (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013; Hall, 2008, as cited in Park, 2011). Easterbrooks and colleagues (2013), in their analysis of the resiliency of military youth during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, found that military youth are less likely to engage in risky behavior. Furthermore, while extended deployments can certainly result in significant stress and related mental health concerns (Flake et al., 2009), Easterbrooks et al. (2013) contend that deployment situations have the potential to bring families closer and promote independence and increased responsibility. Other strengths are the likelihood that military youth have not only a strong connection to their families, but also to their communities as well, particularly when facing similar challenges and experiences (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).

Speaking specifically about the role of the school psychologist in supporting the needs of military youth, Sherman and Glenn (2011) cite their additional strengths, such as having a sense of duty and commitment to teamwork, which are critical for success within a military environment. Taking a strengths-based/resiliency approach means that school psychologists honor and foster the many gifts and strengths that military youth and their families bring to schools through their personal lived experiences, including those connected with military service (Masten, 2001; Park, 2011). From a school psychology perspective, a strengths-based/resiliency approach is realized by carefully listening to the concerns voiced by military youth and and their families when determining how to support their educa-

tional, social, and mental health needs. Rather than determining what should be “done with” military youth as they transition in and out of school settings, a strengths-based/resiliency approach dispels the myth that they are needy or a burden to schools. The empirical literature documents that military youth function very well academically, even better than their Civilian peers (Park, 2011, as cited in Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Military youth and their families may simply need the right support at the right time to be successful in navigating educational environments, while also navigating other aspects of military life, such as frequent moves and school transitions (Fenning, Harris, & Viellieu, 2013). Furthermore, the support of school psychologists and other school professionals may also be warranted when the family is facing the impending deployment of a parent, especially deployments that are of longer durations (Flake et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2011).

Resiliency Approach

School psychologists can additionally draw upon the psychological literature on resiliency when thinking about how to best support military youth and their families. Masten (2001) argues that resiliency is not extraordinary behavior on the part of individuals, but rather “a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of the human adaptational system” (p. 227). Masten (2001) further stresses that resiliency is based on “ordinary” (p. 227) developmental processes. Easterbrooks et al. (2013), define *resiliency* as a bidirectional process that involves the interaction of an individual with his or her environment and apply the concept to military youth. They state, “The relations between an individual and his or her context produce resilience” (p. 100). Easterbrooks et al. (2013) further specify that resiliency operates in much the same manner for military-involved youth as their Civilian peers in a similar two-way process with fluid individual and environmental interactions. The expression of resiliency in one context or situation does not necessarily result in the expression of the same coping strategies under different environmental conditions (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Easterbrooks and colleagues further argue that it is important for practitioners to be mindful that military youth face stressors unrelated to military life that are similar to the ones experienced by their non-military involved peers, with the exception of the deployment cycle. School psychologists should consider military youth as individuals and not assume that they are only defined by their connection with the military. They benefit from developmental guidance similar to their Civilian peers, yet owing to the demands of military life, may also need the right supports at key moments, such as when transitioning into or out of a school. Military youth and their families may also need support during other critical times, such as during the deployment cycle. School psychologists, who are positioned in schools with access to military youth, can meet this need and provide general developmental guidance in the life of the military family.

Relatedly, Masten (2013b) argues for the potential application of developmental systems theory (DST) in supporting military families. DST models are based on the notion that child and adolescent development is tied to the multiple contexts in which children and adolescents function, including classrooms, the family unit, larger communities, and

societal structures (Masten, 2013b). Applied to military families, the developmental timing of different events and stressors can differentially impact individual child functioning and the larger family system (Masten, 2013b). School psychologists should be aware not only of the stressors faced by military children and their families, but also carefully consider the developmental stage of the military youth at the time and provide a developmentally appropriate response. As an example, during a parental military deployment, the consultation that school psychologists have with colleagues about how to support the military youth would differ, depending on whether a deployment occurs in early childhood/preschool, elementary school, or middle or high school, given the developmental differences in cognition, social understanding, and affect (Masten, 2013b). At the same time, school psychologists should understand that individual military youth and families have different stressors outside of military life, varied support systems, diverse cultural beliefs, and so forth. School psychologists should have an understanding of the fluid and reciprocal nature of developmental stages, as well as individual differences, and not apply a “one-size-fits-all” response to their interactions with military youth and their families. DST is aligned with a strengths-based/resiliency approach because military youth are seen as young people first with developmental needs that should be normalized as part of growing up and not automatically pathologized because they are connected with the military. School psychologists can help to deliver a strengths-based/resiliency approach that meets military youth at their level of development and treats them as individuals (Cozza, Lerner, & Haskins, 2014; De Pedro et al., 2011; Masten, 2013b). They can most efficiently support military families and youth by facilitating prevention-oriented programs and interventions, delivered in schools and facilitated by school–community collaborations along a continuum of support (Adelman, 1996). The continuum of support most aligned with this approach is multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) (Brown-Chidsey & Andren, 2013). We recommend MTSS as the preferred framework for military youth because it is a data-driven model of efficiency that is widely implemented in schools nationwide. School psychologists are among the leaders of MTSS development and implementation across the country and are uniquely positioned to adopt and adapt MTSS for use with military youth and their families (Brown-Chidsey & Andren, 2013; State of Florida, 2012).

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Chapter 3 focuses on the MTSS process specific to military youth and the role of school psychologists in the process. Stated briefly, MTSS are models of educational service delivery in which problem-solving school-based teams, often facilitated by school psychologists and other specialists trained in data-based decision making, determine, deliver, and evaluate academic, behavioral, and social–emotional supports for all students on a schoolwide system level (universal; Tier 1), and when data findings warrant it, to groups of students as supplements to universal/Tier 1 supports (secondary; Tier 2) and/or in a more robust individualized manner with students who have the most intensive needs (tertiary; Tier 3). Formative

assessment data are collected on a routine and ongoing basis to determine how instruction and interventions are working and to fluidly move students across tiers of support as needed, based on data analysis (State of Florida's MTSS, 2012). Curriculum-based measures (CBMs), such as those used as reading screeners, are commonly used in systemwide academic screening processes that typically occur routinely three times per year (Shinn, 2010). Decisions are made on the basis of these data to determine the percentage of students who do not meet established Tier 1 benchmarks and would benefit from supplemental supports (Tier 2, secondary) and/or the most intensive Tier 3 (tertiary) supports (Shinn, 2010). On the behavioral front, schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS) has a parallel approach that prioritizes using data to deliver and evaluate systemwide behavior supports for the entire school population. SWPBS practice includes systemwide development, the direct teaching and acknowledgment of behavioral supports, and a systematic manner of collecting and reviewing behavioral data to monitor student responsiveness (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Sandomierski, Kincaid, & Algozzine, 2007). MTSS and relatedly, SWPBS, focus on the performance of the entire school population so that universal system-level core curricula and interventions, whether in the academic, behavioral, or social domain, are as robust as necessary to meet the needs of the largest percentage possible within the school setting, often defined as at least 80% of the school population (Brown, Steege, & Bickford, 2014).

MTSS Applications to Military Youth and Families

MTSS models focus on how particular subgroups within a school population are responding to the universal core curriculum and other interventions that have been determined by a school team as sufficient to meet the school-related needs of youth who require more intensive supports (State of Florida, 2012). Because MTSS approaches are increasingly being used to evaluate outcomes with subpopulations of students, they are highly applicable for use with military youth. Gilreath, Estrada, Peneda, Benbenishty, and Astor (2014) recommend a public health model aligned with MTSS, and from which MTSS is derived, that uses disaggregated data collected specifically on military youth to drive prevention-oriented interventions and programming. School psychologists can apply their knowledge of and experience with MTSS by increasing attention on data collection with subgroups of military youth in their schools and by using the findings to deliver contextually relevant interventions and supports (Brown-Chidsey & Andren, 2013; Burns & Gibbons, 2012).

Highly promising and relevant research and practical applications that directly align with the data-based decision-making components of MTSS are already being conducted. Examples in the military literature show the value of collecting and systematically analyzing school-based data disaggregated by military youth (Chandra & London, 2013, as cited in Cozza, et al., 2014; Cozza et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2014). School psychologists, as the data-based decision making experts in the schools, can be instrumental in broadening this work and evaluating it on a systemwide national level. In California, Gilreath and colleagues (2014) reported preliminary findings from a statewide survey, The California

Healthy Kids Survey (CalSCHLS), which contains modules developed specifically to survey military youth. The version for military youth covers youth perspective about school climate, military-related stressors, school safety, and personal wellness. A parent version contains items about their families' military history, how schools were chosen for their children, and their satisfaction with their schools' sensitivity to their military service. The content in the staff version focuses on how sensitive and understanding school personnel are about the lives of military youth. Schools in participating districts can select their preferred modules; these districts have collaborated with USC building-capacity personnel to review the data and set priorities for intervention and programming for military youth. One promising outcome of the data sharing and analysis was a focus on mental health interventions for military-connected youth (Gilreath et al., 2014). The modules are copyright protected and cannot be reproduced without permission. However, they can be viewed at the CalSCHLS website (https://calschls.org/survey-administration/downloads/#ssm_mcs).

Specific Functions of School Psychologists in MTSS Data-Based Decision Making

Given that school psychologists can follow military youth during the time they attend school in a particular district, and can help facilitate, with parental or guardian permission, the release of informative academic and other school-based data if students transition to other schools, a database can be generated that can inform long-term outcome data and developmental milestones consistent with the need to have a better understanding of military youth development over time (Cozza et al., 2014). Here is where school psychologists can make data-driven practices with military youth a norm in schools across the country. One specific area in which school psychologists can apply their data-based decision-making skills as part of MTSS practices is with young children in military families, who comprise a large percentage of the military population (DoD, 2016). We offer a research-based illustration pertaining to young children here.

Early Childhood Data Collection

Cozza and colleagues (2014) point out that, although the knowledge base about standard developmental changes across all ages and stages is limited, normative data on young pre-school children are particularly scant. School-based professionals, such as school psychologists, school social workers, speech and language clinicians, and others involved with screening for early intervention as part of federally mandated Child Find procedures (Wright & Wright, 2008), could make an invaluable contribution to the profession in supporting young military children. An initial basic step, which has not been widely adopted, would be for the school or district conducting the screening to track demographic and academic screening information about the military status of families (Cozza et al., 2014; Garcia, De Pedro, Astor, Lester, & Benbenishty, 2015). These efforts could be a routine part of data collection when school districts engage in Child Find procedures through community screenings. These

data could be compiled over time for the purposes of designing and delivering the most optimal early intervention services with the young military family in mind. Further, school psychologists can contribute to establishing a literature base that tracks military youth over the years, beginning in early childhood when they and their families first form relationships with educators (Cozza et al., 2014). This is an outstanding opportunity for school psychologists to collect much needed developmental information about military youth to better serve them in today's schools. This early childhood application is one example in which the routine practices of school psychologists, such as conducting early childhood screening, could be modified to capture the early childhood screening data of young military children. These efforts, along with the interventions and supports for young military children, could be tracked over time and modified, guided by the data.

The following fictional case study builds upon the introductory content offered in this chapter. Specifically, it describes how a school psychologist could approach this case from a strengths-based/resiliency perspective advocated for working with military youth and their families.

The Calderon family of five comprises Rita (mother, age 43), Tom (father, age 41), and three children (twins, Alicia and Michael, age 10, and Robert, age 3). Rita and Tom, both of Mexican descent, grew up in a midsize town in Texas. Rita is in the Marine Corps Reserve and works as a school secretary. Tom is an accountant in private practice. Alicia and Michael are in the fourth grade at Sunnydale Elementary School that serves a diverse population of students, including a high percentage of youth from Hispanic backgrounds. Alicia and Michael both like their school and teachers a great deal. They are in different classrooms: Alicia has Mr. Mathis and Michael has Ms. Ruben. Alicia plays soccer, while Michael is active in baseball. Robert just started preschool for three mornings a week. Approximately 20% of students at Sunnydale Elementary School are connected with the military, either through the Marine Corps Reserves or through an active-duty military installation located in their town as well.

In terms of early history, Rita and Tom emigrated to the United States as young children with their parents. The maternal grandparents (Emma and Isaac) have remained in the area and live 15 minutes from the Calderon family. They spend significant time with the grandchildren, playing a critical role in child care and attending family events and sports that Alicia and Michael play. Emma and Isaac are most comfortable speaking Spanish. Michael's father, Nathaniel, passed away when Michael was young, and he had significant responsibilities in caring for his three younger siblings. Michael's mother, Maria, lives in California and often spends most of the summer staying with the Calderon family. Rita has had one previous deployment to Iraq when the twins were toddlers. At that time, her mother moved into the home and helped to care for the twins when Tom worked. Her younger sister, Anna, who has two children about the same age as the twins and lives 5 minutes away, provided a great deal of assistance with child care and helping with errands. This was particularly helpful during the tax season, when Tom was gone for long hours and felt that he could not cut back his workload because he is self-employed. Although the family described Rita's previous deployment as highly stressful, they reported being thankful for

grandparent support and the support of several childhood friends of Rita's who remained in nearby towns and assisted with the young children on the weekends. Rita has not been called up for active duty and reports that they have all settled into family life. However, recently, Rita received a notice that she was to report for training in a town approximately 2 hours away for an estimated period of 4 months. While Rita and Tom report a close relationship and feel strong family support, they are worried about the separation and how a third young child may create new challenges. Rita's parents, sister, and close friends are willing to help, but Rita and Tom are concerned about relying so much on others who have obligations of their own. Nevertheless, they will be seeking the help of these extended family members and friends. As a school psychologist, how could you assist and provide support to the family? Here are some next steps that the school psychologist could take in implementing a strengths-based/resiliency approach to supporting the Calderon family.

- The school psychologist could conduct an assessment to identify the needs expressed by the family for support related to the upcoming deployment and any family-identified concerns. Using a strengths-based approach, the needs assessment could be developed with guiding questions that facilitate the identification of strengths. The principles of the wraparound planning process—in which family interviews begin from a strengths-based perspective (Bruns et al., 2004, p. 9) and in which needs are determined by the family rather than by clinical diagnostic models aligned with traditional service delivery—could be adopted by the school psychologist. Wraparound planning prioritizes “natural supports” (Bruns et al., 2004, p. 6), such as family and friends, rather than supports tied to traditional social services (Bruns et al., 2004), which is consistent with how the Calderon family defined their support system and how they have problem-solved in the past.

- Taking a strengths-based approach, aligned with models of resiliency, the school psychologist could identify a number of family strengths and natural supports to draw from. The Calderon family has a number of extended family members who have provided support. For instance, Emma and Isaac, the maternal grandparents, as well as Rita's sister, Anna, and family friends have been integral in helping the family in a previous deployment and in their day-to-day lives. These “natural supports” (Bruns et al., 2004, p. 6) were identified by family members as part of a team of individuals already in the family's support system who could assist during Rita's pending deployment.

- Because numerous caretakers are going to be involved with the family and taking on some of the parenting role in Rita's absence, the school psychologist could research and recommend a family-based intervention in close collaboration with the family and close friends. There are a couple of different interventions that have been developed specifically for military families who are experiencing a deployment to select from. One option is the Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) program (Lester et al., 2012, 2013), the school-based version of which has been implemented and evaluated in schools (Garcia et al., 2015). Another option is After Deployment: Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT; Gewirtz, Polusny, Forgatch, DeGarmo, & Marquez, 2009; Gewirtz, 2013; Palmer, 2008). In close col-

laboration with the family, the school psychologist could review each program's evidence and decide whether the content is culturally responsive and appropriate. The most optimal program is the one selected *with* the family members, not *for* them.

- In this case scenario, the family and school psychologist could perhaps select FOCUS as the primary intervention to implement with Rita, Tom, and the main caregivers to assist during Rita's deployment because of the program's emphasis on strengthening family cohesion, problem solving, and communication for the entire team of caregivers. It is also important in this case to be culturally sensitive to the family in terms of their child-rearing practices as well as in addressing language issues. Therefore, to be culturally responsive, other supplemental materials and exercises should be considered and the program evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure that it is meeting the Calderon family's needs. For example, the components of the ADAPT program (Gewirtz et al., 2013) specific to relaxation and mindfulness could be embedded in the work with the family and other caregivers. Moreover, throughout Rita's deployment and in the months prior to her return home, a plan with everyone involved could be developed to redistribute parenting tasks upon Rita's return (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).

- At the classroom level, the children's teachers could also receive specific psychoeducation about the deployment cycle (Chandra et al., 2011) and consultations with the school psychologist to prevent and address any academic, behavioral, or social-emotional concerns that may arise. The teachers could also serve in a mentorship role with the children, given the positive relationships that already exist.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW

The subsequent chapters continue to emphasize a strengths-based/resiliency approach (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Masten, 2011; Park, 2011) grounded in a healthy MTSS foundation (Brown-Chidsey & Andren, 2012). Chapter 2 provides an overview of the various school environments in which military youth are educated to facilitate contextually relevant school psychology service delivery for them and their families. Chapter 3 focuses on how MTSS supports and universal screening efforts can be implemented with this military population, and Chapter 4 describes healthy social development among military youth. Chapter 5 discusses mental health supports with military youth and their families. Chapter 6 covers issues related to school transitions, which tend to be plentiful for military populations. Subsequently, Chapter 7 examines legal considerations, and the culminating Chapter 8 provides an overall summary of the previous chapters and offers some future directions for the field.

Please note that in an attempt to be inclusive of readers who do not identify with masculine or feminine pronouns, the pronouns *they/them/their* are used when referring to a single individual.