MENTORING FOR MILITARY-CONNECTED YOUTH

MENTOR

INTRODUCTION

Military families know well that when a family member serves, it is a sacrifice with effects that extend throughout the entire family. There are 1.6 million children in the U.S. with a parent in the active-duty military, National Guard, or Reserve, and more than two-thirds are younger than 11 years old.[1] Military family members outnumber active service members and nearly 40% (over 450,000) of personnel have at least 1 child.[2] In this brief, military-connected youth, or military youth, refers to children with at least one parent actively serving in any military branch (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard), National Guard, or Reserve. Though frequently noted for their ability to adapt to change and demonstrate resilience in the face of uncertainty, military-connected youth face unique challenges compared to their nonmilitary peers.

Military families are highly mobile and relocate frequently as a routine part of service. With relocation comes the necessary task of uprooting and adjusting to life in a new community. Military youth are estimated to move six to nine times during their primary school years: three times the rate of nonmilitary youth.[3,4] With each move, families depart not only their home but systems which they have grown familiar. Youth must be enrolled in a new school where they will need to be oriented to a new building, new classrooms, new teachers, and attempt to forge new friendships with peers. Parents face their own set of challenges and often find themselves isolated and lacking a network of local support – which may be felt even more acutely in communities which are largely nonmilitary.[5]

Military-connected youth and families also face the challenge of ongoing separation and reconnection with a service member due to deployment. In times of conflict, these separations can impact large numbers of American families — for example during military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2010, nearly 2 million young people experienced the deployment of a parent.[6] Lengthy and recurring deployments require shifts in family structure and responsibilities, contributing to stressors experienced by the non-deployed parent or family member. Service members and their families undergo different stages during a deployment cycle that can result in increased stress and varied emotional responses.[7] For example, the anticipation of a family member's departure requires families to begin the overwhelming task of emotionally and logistically preparing for life without the service member while they are deployed.[8] These periods of adjustment will fluctuate and extend well beyond when the service member is deployed and after their return home.

Despite the strength and resilience that military families demonstrate, military youth can experience socioemotional and academic issues as a natural response to frequent change and uncertainty. In one study, youth who experienced parental deployment for 19 months or more were shown to have lower academic performance than youth with a parent deployed for less than 19 months or not at all.[9] Military youth also experience anxiety at significantly higher rates than nonmilitary youth and are more likely to report difficulty with family relationships.[10] Findings from a meta-analysis suggest that elementary-aged children are particularly vulnerable and are more negatively impacted by stressors that come with military family life than adolescent military youth.[11]

Amid increased calls to support service members and their families[12], concerted efforts have been made to develop mentoring programs specifically for military-connected youth, or to expand efforts to serve this population through existing programs. Although the presence of a safe, caring adult mentor may seem a positive means to provide additional support to military youth, the concept of mentoring may come with preconceived notions for military parents, as some military parents may not view mentoring as an appropriate fit for their child's needs.[13] Even when seeking out additional supports for their children, military parents face a challenging paradox: engaging in programs or services that target the unique challenges military youth experience – though potentially beneficial – may result in their child feeling singled out amongst peers. Several studies noted this experience, with parents reflecting the tendency of programs to label children as "military" and subsequently create negative stereotypes about the experience of military families.[14,15] For these reasons, mentoring programs and practitioners will need to clearly describe the purpose and scope of mentoring (providing youth with a supportive adult who is safe and fun), dispel common myths (mentoring is only for "at-risk" youth), and clarify what mentoring is not (replacing a parent/caregiver or counseling) in order to effectively recruit and serve military families.

MAJOR RESEARCH FINDINGS

Mentoring offers a practical approach to supporting military youth and their families and has previously been shown to improve academic performance[16] and decrease symptoms of depression[17] – areas which military youth may be especially vulnerable. Research on mentoring for military-connected youth is an emerging area in the field with much remaining to be understood about the efficacy of these efforts. Preliminary findings have yielded mixed but encouraging results such as:

- **Improved social support and parental ratings of stress in the home**. Results from analyses of a 2016 study examining the effects of the *MentorConnections* program suggested benefits to both the child and parent after participating in a school-based mentoring program. Students who participated in the program reported benefits to social support while parents reported lower ratings of stress in the home. [18]
- **School-based mentoring may be particularly beneficial to address the risk for social and academic difficulties experienced by military youth**. Although military youth will move numerous times throughout their primary education years, schools remain a constant entry point for services. Schools enable youth to receive services more consistently and have the potential to offer support that is perceived as less stigmatizing than services families might access through military agencies.[19]

MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR MILITARY-CONNECTED YOUTH

- The **Military Student Mentoring (MSM)** project is the first randomized controlled trial to examine the benefits of mentoring for military-connected elementary students. Study investigators partnered with four elementary schools in the North Thurston school district in Washington state, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Washington, and ERIC Institute of Education Sciences to implement the *MentorConnections* school-based mentoring program. MSM has released a detailed program manual offering guidance for implementing *MentorConnections,* with particular emphasis on how established programs can enhance existing services to be more responsive to military youth and families. The manual provides an extensive overview of program design and delivery, including recommendations for family recruitment and engaging multisystemic stakeholders in collaborative partnerships. Training resources, including the program manual and training modules, are publicly available through the MSM website.

- **Tuesday's Children** offers multiple programs for families who have lost a family member due to terrorism, military conflict, or mass violence. Their youth mentoring programs pair adult mentors with children 6-18 nationwide who have lost a parent or sibling who served in the U.S. military.
- Run by Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Diego County, **Operation Bigs** (OB) provides mentors to children of military families (active duty, veteran, and Gold Star families). Since its establishment in 2004, similar program expansions have been implemented in Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliates across the country.
- Though no longer in operation, one of the most prominent examples of mentoring for military-youth is the **Amachi Expansion for Military and Civilian Families (AEMCF) Project**. Established in 2011 as an expansion of the Amachi mentoring organization, AEMCF provided mentoring services to military-connected youth ages 9-17. With funding provided through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and in partnership with Dare Mighty Things, Amachi supported mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Rochester (NY), Philadelphia Leadership Foundation (PA), Pima Prevention Partnership (AZ), and Urban Ventures (MN), to augment existing practices to better serve military families.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

Mentoring is a viable option to support military youth and their families as a part of a wider web of supports. Policymakers and other stakeholders interested in expanding mentoring opportunities for military-connected youth and families may consider the following actions:

- **Expand existing mentoring programs to better support military families.** Rather than building new mentoring programs (which take considerable resources and time), existing mentoring providers can increase their capacity to serve military families. To better reach this highly mobile population, programs may need to increase time spent actively recruiting military youth. Military families dispersed throughout a community will be more difficult to locate than families living on a military base. Providers will also need to consider modifications to training which targets competencies to support military families, a particularly important adaptation for program staff and volunteers who do not have personal military experience or do not come from military families. Providers should have a clear understanding of military culture and engage in practices that support the strength and resilience of youth and families.
- **Provide dedicated funding for programs and research.** Dedicated funding through mechanisms such as the federal Youth Mentoring Program (managed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP]) could be a valuable way for programs to grow staff capacity, build needed infrastructure, and overcome logistical challenges in service delivery. Funding to support research efforts will contribute to the narrow body of literature currently available and further our understanding of how mentoring can affect positive outcomes for military youth.
- **Build partnerships with military agencies**. Providers serving military-connected youth have found the buy-in and support of military agencies helpful to create program credibility and reach military families. Partners such as branch-specific Family Programs or Family/Spouse Readiness Centers may help providers disseminate program information and increase awareness of mentoring programs available to families. These partnerships may create opportunities to recruit mentors with military experience or garner feedback from the military community for program improvement.

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