

10 Things Military Teens Want You To Know

By the National Military Family Association

Military teens are part of communities worldwide and school nurses, as caring adults in their lives, have an important role to play when it comes to helping them cope with some of the extra stressors they face.

The points in this article were developed from responses from teens gathered over four years of the National Military Family Association's *Operation Purple*[®] camps. It is not a scientific study, but the result of one open-ended question about military life posed to thousands of military youth. *Operation Purple* camps serve military children who have a mom or dad deployed, often in harm's way. Many shared their worries and concerns about their experiences and their cares about their families.

This article is for caring adults that work with youth aged 11-18. Through our work, we found this group struggles the most with deployments, and military life in general, but little information is available about how to help them.

Here's what they want you to know:

- 1. We are proud of our parents.** Teens have complicated emotions relating to their military parents' service. Sometimes, for example, they resent parents for missing important events, even while being proud of the work they are doing. Military teens overwhelmingly name their military parent as a positive role model. As someone who works with teens, you know these years can be tumultuous. Ensuring they have a support structure when they may not have extended family or their military parent around is critical. Just as critical is supporting and encouraging teens' pride in their parent's service.
- 2. We think about war and we know what it means.** Most of us only see war on the news and can separate it from our daily lives. Military youth can't always do that. Their parents go to war. The news is real life for them. Deployed parents can be gone for more than a year at a time and serve multiple deployments. With the unprecedented deployments of the National Guard and Reserve, it's especially important for schools to also be aware of those teens going through the transition to active duty life and a deployment at the same time.
- 3. We move. A lot.** Family and furniture are about the only things that stay the same in a military family's life. By the time the kids grow into teenagers, they've attended several schools, have made numerous new friends, and memorized half a dozen new addresses. Military teens say they like meeting new people and traveling

to new places, but they also say moving is one of the toughest things about military life. In fact, military children will say good-bye to more significant people by age 18 than the average person will in their lifetime¹. These circumstances can pose risks for isolation and can affect a teen's academics and extracurricular activities at a time when college is on the horizon. Take a moment to welcome a new teen and ask how they're adjusting in a new atmosphere.

- 4. We take on a lot of responsibility (but sometimes, it's too much).** When military parents go away for deployments or Temporary Duty (TDY), their family responsibilities fall to the caregiver at home. It's common for teens and pre-teens to assume at least some of those responsibilities. Military youth express pride about gaining independence and maturity when they have to increase their load, but it's easy for these responsibilities to become a burden. Unknowingly, parents sometimes add to this burden and assign adult responsibilities as a means of showing confidence, thus creating too high an expectation.
- 5. We live in the community.** Though children of service members are part of the unique military culture, many live and spend most of their time in the local community. They play in neighborhood sports leagues, join clubs, and even see doctors in your neighborhood. Also, there are more than 700,000 National Guard and Reserve kids who might never live on a military installation. These families look within their community for friendship and support. But to reach our military youth, we have to know who they are and understand them. Make the effort to find out how many military youth you may already be working with.
- 6. We appreciate recognition of our family's service.** Programs, praise, and bargain deals for military families have peppered the country—and teens have noticed. *Operation Purple* campers clearly understand the value of getting free or discounted services such as a free week of summer camp. It reminds them that someone cares about them and understands life is sometimes tough. Of course they need to have a balance of tangible and intangible support. Simply saying thanks or displaying a "Support Our Troops" ribbon means a lot – and teens notice.
- 7. We value diversity and new experiences.** There are nearly 500 U.S. military installations around the world. Some active duty families have lived in places like Germany, Japan, and Italy for several years at a time. Teens and pre-teens may have even picked up a foreign language or two during their mom or dad's tour overseas. Even if they haven't lived overseas, active duty families have experienced many parts of America. The Armed Forces also closely represent the racial makeup of America. Between moving and the diverse nature of the Service, military youth have grown up in an environment that reflects the real world. No matter the

¹ [The Third Culture Kid Experience: Growing Up Among the Worlds](#); David C. Pollock, Ruth E. Van Reken

Service, military youth have embraced the positive parts of change. What an incredible life lesson to learn so young!

- 8. We miss our parents.** Military teens said they missed their military parents and in more ways than one. First, service members are gone a lot. Birthdays, holidays, and family vacations often occur without the service member parent present. Then, there is another kind of missing called “ambiguous loss.” Returning from a combat deployment, the parent may be a different person. Those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or physical injury may have striking differences from when they last saw their teen. Military teens miss the parent they had before the deployment, but it’s not something they can really explain or change. This is compounded by the natural, personal changes a teen experiences during adolescence.

- 9. In a lot of ways we’re just like other teens.** What’s normal? Whatever it is, it’s something all teens strive for. And even though they may use military acronyms in their speech or have traveled to five states and two foreign countries before their 16th birthday, military teens are just like all the rest. They want to fit in, make friends, and have fun. One way to deal with the challenges of military life is to help them see what they have in common with other teens. Also, maintaining a sense of normalcy is key to getting through deployments.

- 10. We serve too.** Strength, perseverance, and sacrifice are words we associate with our troops. But we see these same traits in military teens. They send care packages to their deployed military parent. They take on new tasks when situations change in their families. They grow up with a sense of community and service to country. While they do it for their family, they’re sustaining their service member for America, too. Celebrate their achievements. Recognize their efforts to the country. Empower all youth and the powerful contributions they can make in their communities.

For more detail on these issues, and specific resources for caring adults, visit www.militaryfamily.org/toolkit for a free downloadable copy of *10 Things Military Teens Want You To Know*.