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## Effectively Meeting the Needs of Military-Connected Children Through Literature in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

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### Introduction

Military-connected students are children with one or more parents in the U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Guard, or Reserves. There are 2 million military-connected students attending schools in every school district in the United States (Operation Educate the Educator, n.d.). These children often have little control over their lives, especially with the current cycle military personnel deployments. Schools can become a refuge away from the worries and chaos of military life, a place where students can be distracted from the stress of having a deployed parent. It can also serve as a safe space to express emotions associated with military life. In order to make the schools a safe haven, educators must understand the needs of military-connected students and utilize the tools to effectively meet those needs. This paper presents the following:

- (1) A theoretical framework to identify military children's' needs and educators' appropriate responses
- (2) A list of relevant children's literature easily incorporated into elementary social studies curriculum

### Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the particular needs of military-connected children are presented in research that: focused on culturally responsive classroom management, which must be promoted by administrators and classroom teachers; and the Military Family Syndrome, which details specific affective issues routinely faced by students.

According to Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke (2003), two of the prerequisites of culturally responsive classroom management are "we must recognize that we are all cultural beings, with our own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior" and "we must acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people" (p. 270). In order to be an effective teacher of military-connected students, educators must put aside their prejudices and preconceived notions about



military life and learn about modern military culture. They must also recognize that military-connected students come from a unique culture, with both negative and positive effects.

**Respect for the military.** All students should feel as though their culture is respected and valued at school. However, this is not always the case for military students. Waliski et al. (2012) found that making negative comments about the war or service members can cause additional stress of sadness for military families. It is important that school personnel remember to monitor their opinions while with military students.

**Stereotypes.** Educators may stereotype some military students due to their misconceptions about the parents' educational levels. For example, many teachers pride themselves on treating officers' children and enlisted members' children equally, yet may stereotype the enlisted parents as being less educated. However, this is not necessarily true in today's career military as many enlisted individuals have a college education. (Keegan et al., 2004).

**Parental involvement.** Military families come together to support each other. Depending on the circumstances, influential people may be the higher-ranking officer and enlisted ranks and their spouses. These individuals "...function in ways similar to community elders identified in other cultures" (Keegan et al., 2004, p. 611). This spirit of helping out the community can be used to benefit the school, if the school is open to the idea. The military community is one that is actively committed to education. For example, military members are told that during parent-teacher conferences, their "place of duty" is at the school (Smreka & Owens, 2003). While many schools welcome volunteers, some do not. This could create a barrier between the military communities that highly encourages parents to be actively involved in their children's education.

The second theoretical framework examines specific affective issues often experienced by military-connected children. Military Family Syndrome (MFS) was proposed by Lagrone (1978) after he reviewed 792 case records of children and adolescents in a military mental health clinic. Some of the notable findings of this review included the interaction between the military father and the family. For example, in the military, confrontation is actively discouraged and all conflict is mediated by supervisors, thus two-way communication is discouraged. Lagrone saw that this tradition passed over into family life as well. He also suggested that a triangle is formed between the military, the military member, and the family, with the military only viewing the family as an extension of the member. Other issues Lagrone noted were the frequency of scapegoating in the military family, shallow relationships due to a high transience, and family members dealing with emotions by withdrawing. Mothers and children relied on themselves for emotional support and withdrew from the sponsor because of emotional necessity and anger. Fathers had a hard time breaking back into the family after deployments, feeling rejected. There was a tendency to repeat the cycle and avoid the family. He also briefly noted that sometimes the community regards military children as outsiders, discouraging their children from becoming friends with the military children because they will be leaving the area within a few years. He termed this the "gypsy phenomenon." All of these factors combined to create a higher incidence of military children displaying inappropriate behavior compared to their peers.



There is evidence that military families exhibit some of the characteristics of Military Family Syndrome (MFS), and that certain groups show more symptoms than others. Chandra et al (2011) found that 34% of caregivers of military youth aged 11-14 years reported elevated emotional or behavioral problems, compared with 19% in the general population, and that 30% of the military-connected youths self-reported elevated anxiety levels, while only 15% of civilian youths reported the same. In this same study, there were three areas where military-connected caregivers' reports were comparable to studies of other U.S. youth: peer functioning problems; academic engagement problems; and risk behaviors. Chandra et al suggested similar findings regarding emotional issues that were previously reported by Lagrone. For example, spouses indicated that they emotionally withdrew or became angry with the service member in order to cope with upcoming deployments (Waliski et al., 2012). In another study, many teacher and counselor focus groups in one survey indicated they were concerned about the added responsibilities on students during deployment, and 42% "noted that many children became the emotional partners of their home caregiver which also placed undue burden on their lives" (Chandra et al., 2010b, p. 221). For some students, the emotional burdens placed on them may increase before the military sponsor actually deploys. For example, in a study of seven couples, one pair indicated they had their oldest son explain the father was going to deploy to all of his younger siblings (Waliski et al., 2012).

While the evidence for MFS can be conflicting, it does seem as though certain groups of military-connected children display more symptoms than others. Caregivers for children of those in the Reserves or National Guard reported more challenges than those with children of people on permanent active duty (Chandra et al., 2011). Interestingly, children who were older reported more difficulties both during deployment and reintegration (Chandra et al., 2010a). Also, reports from both home caregivers and children indicated that girls exhibited more difficulties than boys when the parent returned home (Chandra et al., 2010a). Families that experienced more total months of deployment also reported more youth emotional difficulties and more problems both during deployment and reintegration (Chandra et al., 2011). This suggests that the cycle proposed by Lagrone (1978) of emotional numbing and withdrawal is present in the children's lives. For active duty single parents and dual-career military families, deployment is even more negative (Keegan et al., 2004). Deployment seems to have a negative effect on military children's emotional health and academic achievement.

MFS has been a contested theory since it was introduced in the late 1970s. However, upon analysis of more recent studies, it seems as though parts of it still hold true for today's military-connected youth. Military-connected students face many of the same challenges as their classmates when navigating their different worlds. However, they have to deal with unique challenges when negotiating specific circumstances, such as parental deployments, mental health issues, and cultural differences. While many military-connected youths navigate these challenges well, some have difficulties.

### **Children's Literature for Military-Connected Students**

So, how can elementary social studies teachers—who are already overburdened with implementing the Common Core State Standards and undergoing revised performance assessments—address the



multitude of issues often faced by military-connected children? Through grade-appropriate literature, children are able to explore their own emotions and relate to story characters that are relevant to them as well as their peers, siblings, and family members.

Roberts and Crawford (2008) describe ways in which literature can effectively support all children's social-emotional development as they "cope with the stresses, anxieties, and feelings of loss that can occur in family life" (p.1). In particular, the authors state that "authentic literature can inform, comfort, and provide models of coping strategies" (p. 3).

Our experiences have led us to fully embrace the concept that incorporating authentic literature into the curriculum enables students to explore the world by informing them about new concepts and ideas. It is an engaging way to introduce a new topic, especially for those learners who need to feel a personal connection to the information. Through literature, children are able to travel between fantasy and reality, across time and across the world. Literature that features military-family stories can inform non-military children about some of the real-world issues and experiences their peers deal with on a daily basis.

To provide an optimal learning environment, educators must provide a classroom in which all children know that their teachers genuinely care about them and they feel safe to share their thoughts and ideas. If students are experiencing a change in their lives, such as a divorce or parental deployment, they may begin to question whether or not they are loved. By reading children's literature that mirrors our students' own lives, we, as teachers, can demonstrate that they are truly cared for and loved. Authentic literature and appropriate discussion provides comfort to students by helping them to feel as though they are not alone, that someone else has gone through the same thing they are going through, and that they are going to be alright.

Furthermore, effective use of authentic children's literature provides support for students who are developing coping strategies because students can directly identify with storyline characters. Teachers can begin talking with students about the problems that characters experience, facilitate discussions about different ways of handling obstacles, and end with a focus on positive outcomes. This process uses children's literature to create a safe space where students are able to discuss and develop their individual coping strategies. By incorporating authentic literature into curriculum, educators can easily provide an avenue that will inform, comfort, and develop coping strategies for all students, especially military-connected children.

Listed below are several books available to teachers that will enable them to educate their students on military family life. Each title includes the intended grade level and is connected to the NCSS Primary Themes. Individual military-connected children and their families can use many of these titles to assist in coping with specific situations such as parental absence or moving. Many of these titles are also well suited to give civilian children a look into military life and could easily be used for reading aloud as part of Veteran's Day lessons or during a unit on civics or jobs in the community.



In conclusion, it is pertinent for all educators to recognize and effectively address the needs of military-connected students. As one study found, “When schools invest in identifying and assisting military children and families, these measures may help prevent the development of severe mental illness and family distress” (Waliski et al., 2012, p. 663). For some students, the only place that they may be able to find assistance could be the school. They may feel as though they cannot reach out to their family because of all of the stress the family is under due to the military lifestyle. Educators can and should help these children through the incorporation of relevant and content-rich curriculum materials.



## **Book List for Military-connected Students**

### **Early Elementary**

**Christiansen, R. & Armstrong, J. (2007). *My Dad's a Hero*. Pennsylvania: Word Association Publishers. (Pre-K-2)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, IV, V, X. This story covers military life in all branches of the armed forces in a child-friendly way. The overall theme considers what it takes to be a hero and emphasizes that not only are service members heroes, but their families are as well.

**Biden, J. (2012). *Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, IV, V, X. Through a child's perspective, Jill Biden tells a story about family life when a parent is at war in other countries. Additional information includes ways individuals can reach out to military families.

**Ehrmantraut, B. (2005). *Night Catch*. South Dakota: Bubble Gum Press. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): IV, IX. While deployed, a soldier utilizes the North Star to play catch with his son.

**Tucker-McElroy, L. (2005). *Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Co. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, III, IV, VIII, X. While Lizzie's mom is away on a deployment, Lizzie keeps her up to date with letters and maps. At the end, Mom responds with a map of her own, leading Lizzie to their reunion. Includes a checklist, "When a Parent is Deployed."

**Bunting, E. (2005). *My Red Balloon*. Pennsylvania: Boyd's Mill Press. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, IV, V. This is a touching story about a young boy who is afraid that his father won't recognize him in the crowd when he returns from an overseas deployment.

**Viorst, Judith. (1998). *Alexander Who's Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) Going to Move*. New York: Antheneum Books for Young Readers. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, IV. This story features Judith Viorst's popular Alexander, facing a household move with the author's trademark humor and keen sense of what's important to kids.

**Scillian, D. (2006). *H is for Honor: A Military Family Alphabet*. Michigan: Sleeping Bear Press. (K-4)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, II, III, IV, V, VI, IX, X. Written by the son of a career officer, this book explores the branches of the Armed Services and speaks from the heart about the honor, privileges and sacrifices of military families everywhere.

**Hardin, M. (2010). *Hero Dad*. New York: 2 Lions. (Pre-K-2)**



NCSS Theme(s): I, IV, V, X. A boy compares his father, a U.S. soldier, to a superhero.

**Karst, P. (2000). *The Invisible String*. California: Devorss & Co. (K-3)**

NCSS Theme(s): I, II, IV. The author addresses children's fears of being separated from loved ones by delivering a message that even if we are apart from them, we are still connected.

**Remey, G.A. (2012). *Lion's Pride: A Tail of Deployment*. Self-Published. (K-3)**

NCSS Themes: I, IV, V, X. This story is written by a second-grader and told from the perspective of an eight-year-old lion cub's experiences and feelings through all the stages of the deployment cycle. The book also includes a 'How To' section describing ideas families can use during deployment to help children cope.

**Remey, G.A. (2013). *Lion's Pride on the Move*. Self-Published. (K-3)**

NCSS Themes: I, IV, V, X. Another story from the young author, Grace Ann Remey, told from the perspective of a little lion and her pride who are about to make a big move. She shares feelings of excitement, sadness and fear while showing readers ideas to make moving fun. A great story to help children understand what it is like to move, the book also includes practical ideas for parents to make the transition easier.

### Older Elementary and Middle School

**Anderson, L.H. (2014). *The Impossible Knife of Memory*. New York: Viking. (Gr. 4-9)**

NCSS Themes: I, II, III, IV, V, X. Young Peyton Aldrich's father's military work is top secret and cannot be discussed with the family. However, Peyton admires his father and believes his father helps keep the country safe.

**Donahue, J. (2001). *Till Tomorrow*. New York: Farrar Straus Group. (Gr. 4-9)**

NCSS Themes: I, II, III, V, VI, IX, X. A story about a 12-year-old boy who moves to an Army base in France, based on the author's childhood. There are interesting ties to history including the conception of the Berlin wall, illustrating how tensions between nations are not just a thing of the present.

**Fontes, J. (2011). *Benito Runs*. Ohio: Darby Creek Publishing. (Gr. 4-6)**

NCSS Themes: I, II, III, IV, V, X. In this engaging story, Benito's father is in the National Guard and deployed to Iraq.

**Patterson, V.O. (2013). *Operation Oleander*. New York: Clarion Books. (Gr. 4-9)**

NCSS Themes: I, III, IV, V, VIII, IX, X. A story set at a fictitious Army base about a girl whose father is deployed to Afghanistan. The story well illustrates life of the modern military family including expectations and responsibilities of family members and the role technology plays in holding the family together in the absence of the father.





An extensive list of books with military connected themes for a variety of age groups can be found at [www.militarybooksforchildren.info](http://www.militarybooksforchildren.info).



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