This issue of The Clergy Connection is devoted to the most vulnerable members of the military family — its children. Children, often the least outspoken of those who suffer, may bear the burdens of their parents. This issue of The Clergy Connection begins our exploration of the effects of war on the young.

**Practical Pastoral Tips**

Part of effective pastoral care is providing resources for those at risk. Young children are at risk for mental health problems during and after the deployment of a parent. Forty percent of children of military families are younger than five years old.

Sesame Street has designed an effective tool kit for children in military families that can be used by their caregivers. The tool kit is for children aged from 0-5 years. It is called "Talk, Listen, Connect" and has three units:

- Helping family members stay connected while apart
- Helping children cope with injuries to parents (both visible and invisible)
- Helping children talk about death and keeping memories alive.

The tool kit has research support to show it is effective. Results of using this tool kit include:

- Reduced symptoms of depression, aggression, and social isolation in children
- Increased social ability with peer children
- Reduced feelings of depression and hopelessness in caregivers.

80% of parents reported the "Talk, Listen, Connect" tool kit helped their children cope better with future deployments.

Sesame Street materials are explained and available through downloads at the following website:

http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/tlc

A somewhat different but promising multi-family group intervention is currently being tested.

**Would you like more information?** Please visit:


**RCTP Online Learning Webinars**

The Rural Clergy Training Program (RCTP) is pleased to announce the launch of our Webinar series. The first webinar, “Bringing Your Community Together to Bring Our Veterans Home,” discussed practical ways that communities can come together to get Veterans and their families the support they need. View the Webinar online, on demand, at:

https://chapvaco.adobeconnect.com/p5g2cj1vdc.

The second Webinar in the series, “Rural Clergy and Confidentiality — An Ethics Review,” explored commonly occurring ethical issues surrounding confidentiality and privacy for rural clergy, and highlighted several rural characteristics that impact ethical issues for today's clergy. View the Webinar online, on demand at:

https://chapvaco.adobeconnect.com/p1ppyxl8h60.

Visit the RCTP website for more information:


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Research: Stress and the Military Child

Recent research has learned much about the effects of deployment on the children of deployed parents. Here are some important findings.

Many children show age-dependent changes during a parent’s deployment (see The Clergy Connection, February 2014 for details) related to psychiatric symptoms, especially anxiety and depression. For example, children younger than five may show attachment problems (e.g., ignoring a parent or clingingness); a teen is more likely to show classic symptoms of depression or anxiety. Anxiety symptoms include tendencies to worry more, to feel very stressed, and to have an inner feeling of restlessness. They may also be depend more on others or withdraw from them. They may report problems with tiredness or pain. Depressive symptoms include lack of motivation, problems with concentration and decision-making, sadness and feelings of guilt or hopelessness, and disrupted sleep. Either anxiety or depression may result in irresponsible or self-defeating behaviors (e.g., use of drugs or alcohol, poor grades in school). Teens with deployed parents report poorer quality of life and increased thoughts of suicide. They also report greater problems with peer relationships. Academic performance is often reduced. Children of deployed parents are less likely to finish homework and more likely to be absent from school.

The underlying causes for these changes rest with their changed roles and parental concerns. Studies show that teens’ mental life becomes more focused on their own increased responsibilities with an absent parent, concerns over the deployed parent’s welfare, and concerns over their caregiver’s stress level. (Research shows increased levels of child maltreatment at the hands of the nonmilitary caretaker during deployment.) These worries reflect unexpected and unfamiliar challenges for which the teen is not prepared to cope. For that reason, he/she often responds with anxiety and depression and/or acting out.

The re-integration period also presents particular challenges for children, especially if the returning parent has a psychiatric condition. Couples with a military member with PTSD report poorer cooperation/communication and poorer parenting (see the "Did you know?" section in this issue). Couples that include a parent with PTSD or depression have children who behave less warmly toward them and act as though they are afraid of their parents.

Experience and research suggest that four things stand out in thinking through how to help military children:

- Provide a trusted source of listening to encourage a sharing of the burdens.
- Educate children on what to expect and how to cope.
- Provide parenting education to parents/caregivers.
- Make referrals to professionals experienced with children and the military.

How could your community organize an effort to help these children of military parents?

Would you like more information? [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Chapter%206.pdf](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Chapter%206.pdf)
Reflection: In Their Own Words

Life can be very distressing for children of deployed parents. Distress can show up in quiet or dramatic ways, but the lives of all children of deployed parents change. Here are some statements of pre-teens and teens who have had a parent deployed. As you read these statements, consider the mental and emotional lives of these children and the challenges they face.

- He was kind of a base for our family so without him, things don't go so smooth.
- It's just hard to not concentrate on him being gone.
- I sometimes feel sad.
- (I knew) he was in some action. I thought he'd died.
- You feel like you're broken down, like a piece of you has left forever.
- All the families should pay attention to the kids because the wives/husbands are going through a lot and they've got their problems and so do the kids.

- I think it's easier to talk with someone about it, not just keep it inside because I used to get really angry from keeping it all inside.
- ... at my school (they) brought all the kids whose parents were on deployment and we all got together.
- If I had someone to talk to it would probably be easy but ... like in my community it would be cool if we could get together every week or so and just like talk about how it is.

Clearly there is a great deal going on in the lives of children of deployed parents. Their lives are remarkably complex. Yet they lack the life experience that can help them cope from an adult perspective. Again and again, they ask for support from friends and others.

How might your House of Worship and your community help these children?

Would you like more information?

To learn more about working with military children and to view excellent information on starting a children's support ministry visit:

http://militarykidsconnect.t2.health.mil/teens

Not on the Rural Clergy Training Program mailing list? Join us!

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Sign up today at www.ruralhealth.va.gov/ruralclergytraining/subscribe

Your Story Matters: Teaching Us About Families

This year, the Rural Clergy Training Project added evaluation items to our survey instruments with a special focus on family care because of participant comments at our workshops. Here is what we learned:

- After military-related grief and spiritual issues, marital and family concerns are the most frequent requests made to rural clergy for assistance by Veterans and their families.
- An average of twelve Veteran families were members of the Houses of Worship we surveyed.
- The number of Veteran families in these settings ranged from zero to three hundred.

- Clergy in these houses of worship responded to marital and family issues with about the same frequency they dealt with Veteran issues.

Telephone surveys with rural members of the clergy indicated that clergy's highest priority for additional training is in care for Veteran families.

In summary, issues of military families are an extremely important part of the work of rural clergy. Hopefully, this issue of The Clergy Connection will help rural clergy support and strengthen Veteran families by focusing on the children in military families. Future issues of The Clergy Connection will continue this focus.
Did You Know? Military Children and Parenting

Deployment and the mental health problems of many returning Veterans are central to the difficulties our children face. Children who are exposed to such multiple risk factors are more likely to develop mental health problems during deployment. They also may maintain them after deployment. Parent-child relationships influence whether children experience the stress of multiple hardships as "tolerable" or "toxic." For example, as a parent's mental health symptoms increase, the quality of the parent-child relationship tends to decrease. Strong social support for the child and parents can help to lessen relationship problems, however. Parenting ability appears to be a critical factor. For example, a depressed parent tends to show less parental warmth toward a child and to use more coercive discipline. Parents with PTSD have lower parenting satisfaction and fewer shared positive experiences with their children. Deployment can result in child maltreatment as noted elsewhere.

Relationships matter. Good parenting is critical to improved parent-child relationships. Parenting interventions for military families are in the early stages of development. We will provide information on FOCUS (Project Families Overcoming Under Stress) as an example. In FOCUS, parents and children (ages 3-17) complete eight sessions of parent-only, child-only and family sessions. Sessions include education on stress, emotion control, setting goals, solving problems and family communication. Outcome evaluation results have shown improvements in child and parent emotional and behavioral health and reduced child stress (4 month follow-up). Other parenting interventions are being tested at this time.

We believe that parenting interventions can be an especially important support for military families. Such interventions could be delivered by one or more Houses of Worship and have a very positive influence on both child and the larger family before, during, and after deployments.

Would you like more information?

Community Success Story: Project SOUTH

The mission of Project SOUTH (Serving Our Units at Home) Military Ministries is to express love, honor, and support for the military people and Veterans in the local community as well as their families. The organization owed from VA Chaplain Steve Sullivan’s “VA/Clergy Partnership for Rural Veterans” project. Project SOUTH, located in El Dorado, Arkansas, identified needs in their local community and collaborated with the Share Foundation to create the Military Matters Reading Program. Through this program, $4,300.00 worth of educational resources, books, and other materials were donated to 12 Union County public schools. Books donated are at different reading levels and used to enhance understanding, acceptance and compassion for military families and their children. According to Ms. Sonya Hall, Project Coordinator for Project SOUTH Military Ministries, the goal is to educate students about “Military Matters” by encouraging reading of books with military and patriotic themes and participation in reading events with local heroes. Project SOUTH plans to donate more materials this year and hopes to help expand this program to other communities.