

**Professional School Counselors' Role in Partnering With
Military Families During the Stages of Deployment**

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Abstract

In order to help each student to be successful in school, as outlined in the ASCA National Model, professional school counselors are called to partner with military families in order to work for their children's social, emotional, and academic success during deployments. Possible school-family partnerships that may occur before, during, and after deployments are explored. In addition, the roles of the professional school counselor in these partnerships, which include facilitating educational and emotional preparation, providing emotional support for both children and family members, identifying mental health concerns, and connecting families with needed resources in the community, are discussed.

Keywords: military, families, partnerships, education, school counselor

Professional School Counselors' Role in Partnering with Military Families during the Stages of Deployment

Currently, there are approximately 2 million Active Duty family members in the United States Military. 38.4% of these Active Duty members are married and have children. Approximately 513,000 of these children are ages birth-5 years old, 370,000 of these children are ages 6-11, and 282,000 of these children are ages 12-18 (Department of Defense, 2009). 90% of military children attend public or private schools in the United States (National Military Family Association, 2011). In recent years, over one million family members of active duty military members have experienced a family member's deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan (McFarlane, 2009).

Having a parent deployed affects children emotionally, socially, and academically. Emotional symptoms in children include loneliness, worry, and sadness (DiNola, 2008; Houston et al., 2008). A child with a parent who is deployed is also more likely to be depressed and to experience severe anxiety (Lester et al., 2010; Chandra et al., 2010; Heubner, 2009). She or he may additionally be at a higher risk to be hospitalized for mental health issues (Levai, Kaplan, Ackermann, & Hammock, 1995). Children often feel responsible for their mother's well being if their father is deployed, creating extra stress and a sense of age-inappropriate responsibility (Houston et al., 2008).

As far as school performance, a child with a deployed parent might experience more discipline problems in school (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, S. Grass, & Grass, 2007). She or he may have difficulty arriving to class on time and staying engaged in classroom discussions and activities (Chandra et al., 2010). The student may also show

a decline in school attendance due to crippling anxiety and a subsequent inability to function normally in her or his daily life (Lester et al., 2010).

Students also show a decline in standardized test scores when a family member is deployed. Students who fall behind in school may continue to do so, creating long-term detrimental academic effects (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010). While these academic, social, and emotional challenges that military students face have been explored in the literature, little attention has been given to the role of the professional school counselor in helping these students succeed (Cozza, 2011; Palmer, 2008; Riviere & Merrill, 2010).

Professional school counselors are in an important position to help military families overcome the challenges brought on by deployments because of their position as educators in the school, their connections to resources in the community, their training in and understanding of human growth and development, and their counseling and mental health training (Sink, 2002). One way that professional school counselors can support students from military families that are in the midst of social, academic, and emotional challenges is by partnering with their families before, during, and after deployment with the goal of promoting success for the student and their family. These family-school partnerships are defined as a "shared responsibility of families and educators for supporting students as learners" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p.37-38). By working with, equipping with resources, and supporting family members through partnerships, professional school counselors can proactively help students from military families succeed emotionally and academically. Professional school counselors therein

fulfill their role as collaborators, leaders, and supporters, as outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005).

Ultimately, family partnerships are crucial to a child's education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and success in school (Bryan, 2005; Sink, 2005). When family members are involved in their child's education, their child is more likely to be successful in school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The child will be more likely to pass her or his classes, display positive social skills, have a good attendance and discipline record, and will be more likely to graduate from high school and to attend college (Erford, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Conversely, military family involvement in their child's school results in "successful family environments" (Dauber & Epstein, 1993, p. 53). Because of these benefits and because of the challenges that military families face in regards to deployment, it is important for professional school counselors to proactively build relationships and to work closely with their students' families (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2001; McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003; Swap, 1993). The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges military families face and to offer practical ways in which the professional school counselor can partner with families to help them overcome these challenges.

Partnering During Pre-Deployment Stage

Building Relationships and Overcoming Barriers to the Counseling Process

As a part of their comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2005), professional school counselors can form partnerships with families in the pre-deployment stage in order to spark protective and resilient factors in the families. This stage begins when the family member receives the news that she or he will deploy and

ends with the actual deployment (Laser & Stephens, 2011). This time is often stressful for children as they begin to anticipate and worry about the family member's absence (C.H. Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009) and making the needed preparations for deployment (Lapp et al., 2010). By being proactive and using their relationship building skills (Lapp et al., 2010), professional school counselors can work to overcome barriers faced by military families to receiving mental health services such as embarrassment, fear of harming the family member's military career, or a perceived lack of time (C.H. Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009). In order to gain the confidence of the family members during a deployment, professional counselors might proactively check in with the families on a weekly or monthly basis to show their concern, assess the family's social and emotional functioning, and to ask if any additional help or support is needed. If it appears that the family could benefit from extra support, professional school counselors could then invite the family members to come and meet with her or him at the school, offering the family a welcoming, safe environment to collectively share thoughts and feelings. Throughout this relationship building process, the use of basic counseling skills such as active listening and reflection are ways to provide support to military families, affirm their strengths, and show the professional school counselor's acknowledgement of and concern for the family's distress (Lapp et al., 2010).

Empowering Families Through Education

Once a relationship is formed, one example of a way that professional school counselors can partner with families for student success in the pre-deployment stage is by offering and facilitating parenting education programs (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny,

Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011; Lester et al. 2011). Professional school counselors can empower parents by helping them to understand effective problem solving skills for their children during the upcoming deployment. Parents should also be invited to learn new ideas for giving their children clear directions and to set clear boundaries (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011) during a time of uncertainty and ambiguity (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Professional school counselors can likewise equip parents to recognize and respond to their children's anxiety (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011). Practical coping strategies for such anxiety include encouraging their children write in journals, placing photographs of the deployed parent in the home, or providing children with materials to create scrapbooks or other gifts to send to the deployed family member (Lapp et al., 2010).

Professional school counselors can also educate parents on the importance of remaining consistent in their parenting throughout their pending separation by discussing goal setting, expectations, and parental roles (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011). An example of a learning exercise may include the professional school counselor asking the parents to role play their roles and expectations before, during, and after the deployment (Lapp et al., 2010). Professional school counselors might also teach parents strategies for regulating their own emotions. This affective education includes understanding and identifying their negative emotions that arise during the different stages of deployment as well as coping strategies for handling these emotions appropriately and effectively (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo; Laser & Stephens, 2011).

Partnering During Deployment

Offering Spousal Support

Professional school counselors can likewise partner with families during their separation from a family member throughout deployments in order to create a supportive environment and to provide needed information and resources for their well being and for the children's success in school. One needed area of partnership is added support for the spouse at home with the children (Davis, Ward, & Storm, 2011) as deployments have significant psychological effects on spouses (Lester et al., 2010; Padden, Connors, & Agazio, 2011; C.H. Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009). When the at-home spouse faces challenges, these struggles may in turn affect child functioning, well-being, and safety (Chandra et al., 2010; Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, S. Grass, & Grass, 2007; Lester et al.; Levai, Kaplan, Ackermann, & Hammock, 1995). Past studies offer notable hope as they have shown that spouses who are involved in community activities and feel supported fare better during deployments (Kelley et al., 2002; Padden, Connors, & Agazio, 2011; C.H. Warner, Appenzeller, C.M. Warner, & Grieger, 2009; Lapp et al., 2010), providing the professional school counselor with cause and motivation to proactively form partnerships with families.

One means of partnering with families during deployments is facilitating family support groups (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Laser & Stephens, 2011). Through these groups professional school counselors can create and facilitate an environment where families with shared experiences can support each other (Di Nola, 2008; Houston et al., 2008). In the past, military families have expressed

that they feel more supported by other military family members who understand their thoughts and emotions in comparison to civilian families who have not undergone a deployment experiences (Lapp et al., 2010). Professional school counselors can therefore encourage families to identify and to share coping strategies with one another, empowering them to help and to teach each other effective ways to endure their present separations from family member (Houston et al., 2008). Ultimately, military spouses as well as children report that such support groups bring a sense of relief in the time of a stressful deployment (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Laser & Stephens, 2011).

As far as structure and content, the deployment support group sessions might include sessions with both parents and children, small group sessions consisting solely of children, and/or sessions consisting solely of adult caregivers. Along with group activities, these sessions might include a social time with food and beverages, perhaps provided by outside community partners (Bryan & Henry, 2008), where family members can be encouraged to make connections with one another.

In addition to encouraging interaction and relationship building, the role of the professional school counselor during these sessions includes facilitating the group members' expression of feelings. She or he must judge how much stress the group can successfully tolerate, while asking age-appropriate questions that facilitate a productive and therapeutic discussion amongst the group members (Waldron, Whittington, & Jensen, 1985). Possible therapeutic group activities include reading and discussing books about families who are successful problem solvers. Group members might also be encouraged to create art projects such as a memory books or calendars that reflect

thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They might also write poems, letters or create cards to send to their deployed parent (National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, 2011).

Connecting to Community Resources

Professional school counselors likewise might connect military families with helpful community resources during a deployment (Davis, Ward, & Storm, 2011; Lapp et.al, 2010; Park, 2011). Many resources and family support centers are provided by the military in an effort to help the family function successfully before, during, and after deployments (McFarlane, 2009). These resources can be readily accessed through internet websites such as Military One Source and Operation Homefront (Lapp et al, 2010) and Family Readiness Groups (Di Nola, 2008).

Professional school counselors might also encourage military family members to speak openly throughout the deployment stage with their family physician about physical and mental health issues so they might receive any needed medical interventions (Lapp et al., 2010). Finally, professional school counselors might connect families with academic tutors, businesses, churches, mentorship programs, social service agencies, or other agents in the community that can offer academic and social support and resources to families (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

In addition to offering support and resources to families, professional school counselors might also help facilitate healthy communication between the family at home and the family member deployed. Military families report that constant and consistent contact helps them to feel reassured and connected to their deployed family member (Lapp et al., 2010). One practical way helping families maintain this contact is by

collaborating with technology specialists in the school and community to help spouses access and navigate technology such as webcams, instant messaging, and Skype (Lapp et al., 2010; Laser & Stephens, 2011). These modern methods of communication often prove more effective for families to communicate than phone calls, which are often short and may foster miscommunications between and negative emotions amongst family members (Laser & Stephens, 2011).

Partnering Post-Deployment

Preparing Family Members for Return

In the final stage of deployment, professional school counselors can partner with families in order to offer hope, support, and resources during the often difficult time of readjustment and reintegration. Both the family members who have remained at home and the deployed parent have undergone new experiences and developmental changes. The deployed family member must adjust to life away from the unsafe and dangerous war zone and regain his place in the family (Darwin, 2009). Before the deployed family member returns home, the professional school counselor should therefore help to prepare families both emotionally and mentally.

Discussing Expectations

One means of preparation is to meet with family members in order to help them set realistic expectations about the homecoming and to help normalize the challenges that often arise during this time (Lapp et al., 2010; Laser & Stephens, 2011; Moore & Kennedy, 2010). By engaging them in open discussion and empowering them with coping skills, children and parents should be prepared to handle their emotions of frustration or disappointment that may arise with upcoming changes in the household

(Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Lapp et al., 2010). These changes may include a new power differential (Lapp et al, 2010) or a shift in family members' roles within the household (McFarlane, 2009). In order to prepare for these changes, the school counselor might help the family to develop plans for welcoming and re-integrating the returning family member into everyday activities. For example, the child might plan to invite his returning parent to an upcoming school event. The family might also develop a new chore chart to re-include the deployed family member in the daily household tasks (McFarlane, 2009; Military Child Education Coalition, 2003).

Identifying Mental Health Concerns and Linking Families to Support

After the deployed family member returns, equipped with their training and background in the mental health field, professional school counselors should follow up with families in order to assess mental health of adults and children and to make referrals for long-term counseling when needed (Laser and Stephens, 2011). Active duty family members may return from deployment and be extremely irritable or unable to experience normal feelings or emotions (McFarlane, 2009). They likewise may have difficulty sleeping, managing their moods and may be more likely to abuse alcohol or to commit suicide (Laser & Stephens, 2011; Lester, 2010). In addition, approximately one-third of returning family members are also at-risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Dutra et al., 2011; Laser & Stephens, 2011) that may consequently lead to domestic violence (Laser & Stephens, 2011) and unhealthy parenting practices (Gerwitz, Polusny, DeGarmo, Khaylis, & Erbes, 2010). Each of these symptoms and mental health concerns can have effects on a child's adjustment and can prove detrimental to their own mental health (Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011).

Because of these detrimental effects, if the professional school counselor suspects potential or current mental health issues in the family, she or he should connect families with needed community resources (Lapp et al. 2010; Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011). Intensive therapy may be needed for the returning family member as well as counseling for the family as a whole (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011; Laser & Stephens, 2011). Professional school counselors can provide referrals to a network of outside therapists (Hall & Gushee, 2000) as well as help family members discover and access the plethora of mental health resources and programs provided by the military that are aimed at attending to returning family members in need of mental health services as well as their families (Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011; Military One Source, 2011; Moore & Kennedy, 2010).

Future Research and Direction

Establishing Evidence-Based Practices

Few mental health professionals understand the needs of military families during deployments as military families are a unique and understudied population (Cozza, 2011; Palmer, 2008; Riviere & Merrill, 2010). Therefore, more research is needed into practical and effective ways professional school counselors can help military students and families during each of the three stages of deployment. This expanded research should take on the form of qualitative and quantitative studies exploring the work that professional school counselors do in schools with military families in order to establish evidence-based practices, as there is a current shortage of evidence based programs for military families in the counseling literature (Park, 2011).

Exploring Cultural and Community Pathways

Future research should additionally be aimed at exploring the cultural diversity amongst military families and the ways in which professional school counselors can be attentive to these differences as they serve military families during each stage of deployment. In addition, further investigations should explore school-military partnerships so that schools and military organizations can best collaborate with and serve each other. Each stakeholder provides valuable resources to students and their families and should work together to best meet the needs of their families facing the challenges of deployments.

Counselor Education and Preparation

Finally, due to the extensive need for support for military children and their families, counselor education programs should include awareness trainings for future professional school counselor in regards to the struggles that this unique population faces. Professional school counseling students should also be challenged to engage in action research in their internships and in their future practice in schools in order to develop best practices for partnering with military families (Bryan & Henry, 2008), thus fulfilling the call of the ASCA National Model to develop comprehensive counseling programs that include collaboration with families for all students' success (ASCA, 2005).

Summary

Because of their position in the school as well as their background in counseling training (Sink, 2002), professional school counselors play a valuable role in partnering with military families to help their children cope with the social, academic, and emotional challenges they face during deployments. Depending on the family's needs during each

stage of deployment, these family partnerships exist in a variety of forms including parenting programs, group counseling, spousal support, emotional support, and referrals and connections to outside community resources. Overall, the professional school counselor serves as a valuable educator, supporter, facilitator, and resource provider to the military families in her or his school. In each of these roles, the professional school counselor fulfills the call of the ASCA National Model to serve as a leader, collaborator, and advocate for each student (ASCA, 2005).

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