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# Separated by distance, but never by heart: A guide for elementary and middle school counselors working with military children

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Separated by Distance, but Never by Heart:  
A Guide for Elementary and Middle School Counselors Working with Military Children  
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A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Educational Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my parents for their endless support and encouragement; to my fiancé Ryan who reminds me each day that love conquers all; and to military service members and their families who make countless sacrifices each day in order to protect our freedom.

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## Preface

The topic of military families is near and dear to my heart. In 2004, my fiancé's Marine Corps unit was deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The idea for this project came from reflection of my own experiences with having a loved one deployed during a time of war. I remember sitting in a crowded gymnasium during the family sendoff ceremony, looking around at all of the children who were also preparing to say goodbye to their parent or loved one. I thought of all the emotions I was feeling at that particular moment – sadness, anger, loss, fear, uncertainty, and wondered what must be going through their minds. For instance, did they know what was about to happen or that their lives were about to change? Did they know why their parent had to leave and what they would be doing while they were away?

The following twelve months were one of the most difficult and challenging times in my life. Today, as I reflect on that experience, I remember what helped me get through each day – a listening ear, a friendly hug, support from fellow military girlfriends and wives, and letters and phone calls from across the globe. It's not so different than the needs of military children – someone to listen, someone to care, support from their fellow classmates, connections with other military kids, and communication with their deployed loved one. As a school counselor, you can be that caring person. I hope that this guide will give you the knowledge and tools to reach out to military children and help them navigate the challenging life experience of having a loved one deployed.

## Abstract

Recent years have brought about an increase in the number of families who experience the deployment of a loved one. While deployment is a difficult experience for each member of the family, children are particularly vulnerable during these separations. Researchers have identified specific phases of the deployment cycle as well as potential child reactions during each stage. Within the school setting, school counselors are in an ideal position to provide support for children who are experiencing the deployment of a loved one. This project provides an overview of the literature pertaining to the challenges children and families experience when faced with military deployment. It also reviews a variety of interventions school counselors can use to help children cope with the deployment of a loved one.

## **Introduction**

Many active duty and reserve members of the United States military are currently deployed all over the world. As these troops are called to duty, their families are left behind to face the many challenges of being separated from their loved ones. While deployment is a difficult experience for each member of the family, children are particularly vulnerable during these separations and are affected emotionally, socially, and academically by the deployment of a loved one, especially a parent (Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

The purpose of this Ed.S. project is to create a guide for school counselors working with military children. I will provide an overview of military family life, with a focus on the deployment cycle. I will also review a variety of interventions school counselors can use to help children cope with the deployment of a loved one. The activities presented in this project are geared toward elementary and middle school students and can be tailored to fit the individual circumstances of the student, school, or community.

## **Deployment and Families**

Deployment is defined as “the movement of an individual or military unit either within the United States or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission” (Educator’s guide, n.d., p. 3). Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger (1994) emphasized that deployment during a time of war should be considered a “catastrophic” event in the lives of children and families. If that is the case, then hundreds of thousands of families have already experienced or will experience this catastrophe during the next year. Currently, there are over 1.5 million Americans enlisted in the armed forces. Approximately 55% of



these individuals are married and about 46% of them have children. For the first time in history, the number of military dependants (children and spouses) exceeds the number of active duty and reserve members. Nationwide, there are almost 2 million children who have one or more parents serving in the military (Department of Defense, 2008).

Most wartime deployment studies were conducted during Operation Desert Storm, a war that was remarkably shorter and resulted in fewer casualties than the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, the majority of previous research on the effects of separation on military children focused on paternal absence. In today's military, there are an increasing number of mothers, single parents, and families in which both parents are service members. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, women make up 14% of the armed forces. A study by Applewhite and Mays (1996) found no differences in children's psychosocial problems based on the gender of the parent from whom they were separated.

### **Today's Military**

Currently, there are 140,000 troops stationed in Iraq and 23,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan (Department of Defense, 2008). This is the largest number of U.S. forces serving overseas since the Vietnam War. The United States Army recently projected that the troop levels in Iraq will remain unchanged through the year 2010. Unlike the last major U.S. conflict, Operation Desert Storm, 40% of these deployed soldiers are Reserve and National Guard members. Traditionally, the role of Reserve/Guard troops was to assist with emergencies within the United States. While active duty families can more easily adapt to routine absences of a parent, children in Reserve/Guard families may be dealing with deployment for the first time. Stephanie Surles, research and development

officer for the Military Child Education Coalition, referred to these children as “suddenly military children,” many of whom would not have put themselves in that category before their parents were deployed (Cozza, Chun, & Pollo, 2005). Another challenge for Reserve/Guard members is that when they are called to duty, their families often remain in their home community, which is not typically located in close proximity to a military base and its associated resources.

Another major difference is that past military conflicts, such as Grenada and Operation Desert Storm, were measured in months, but the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being measured in years. As a result, military members and their families are experiencing repeated combat deployments. According to Surles, many parents are now facing their third, fourth, or even fifth deployment. Another factor is the length of deployment. Kelley (1994) showed that short-term parental absence (defined as six months or less) was associated with fewer behavioral difficulties among children. According to the United States Army, the average length of current deployments to Iraq is anywhere between twelve and fourteen months. Consequently, a growing number of children are repeatedly without their parent(s) for an extended period of time.

These separations are especially disruptive for single parent and dual-military families, who must find temporary caregivers for their children while they are deployed. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives often assume this role, yet have little knowledge of how to handle the emotional needs of children separated from their parents. Additionally, if the caregiver lives in a different geographic location, the child may be removed from the familiar friend/school/support networks during the deployment. Some families also move to a temporary location while one parent is deployed in order to be

closer to other family members. Relocation adds another dimension to this already stressful time period. In addition to adjusting to the absence of a parent, these children are also faced with a new home and school environment.

### **The Deployment Cycle**

Generally, the deployment cycle is divided into several distinct stages. Due to the extended length of deployments, a variety of models have emerged in recent years. Some of the literature describes the deployment cycle using an in-depth seven stage model (Deployment Health, 2006), while other studies refer to a five stage model (Hooah 4 Health, 2008). For the purpose of this project, I will be using a basic three stage model which divides the deployment into pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment phases (Amen & Jellen, 1988; Educator's guide, n.d.; SOFAR guide, 2005).

The pre-deployment phase begins when orders for deployment are given and can last from only a few hours to several months. During this phase, families attempt to adjust to the idea of one parent being away for an extended period of time. In some instances, the order to deploy and the day of departure can occur within a matter of days. This rapid separation often catches families off guard and leaves little time to prepare children for their parent's absence. Some research indicates that the time period directly preceding the separation is the most difficult for children who are anxious about having to say goodbye and often feel like their family is about to fall apart (Kelley, 1994). Younger children may not fully understand why their parent is leaving and, because they have not yet developed a clear concept of time, they may become fearful that their parent will never return. A survey done by Hillenbrand (1976) found that the majority of parents

also thought that the most stressful period for the family were the weeks leading up to the separation.

The deployment phase begins when the service member departs for the intended destination and is physically absent from the family. This is the longest phase of the deployment cycle and a time of multiple emotions, including sadness, concern, confusion, and frustration (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1992). In particular, children and their families are often left with feelings of loss, fear, and grief. Actively reaching out to military children and teaching them new coping skills for managing their intense feelings and emotions can be very beneficial. During this phase, families also struggle with defining new roles and responsibilities as they strive to reach a "new normal" daily life (Educator's guide, n.d.). As new routines are established, children begin to learn what life is like without the deployed parent and most families gradually acclimate to the situation.

Post-deployment, or reunion, begins when the service member returns home and begins to reintegrate back into the family. Reunion is typically met with initial feelings of joy, but as the excitement fades, it is often replaced with mixed emotions and uncertainty (SOFAR guide, 2005). Many people assume that the post-deployment phase would be a happy time and pose no problems as the family is finally reunited. In reality, this final phase may be more difficult than the actual deployment as a changed soldier returns to a changed family. The process of reintegration can take up to several weeks or months. Although children may feel happy about the safe return of their parents, they may have trouble reconnecting and feeling comfortable with them. Parents who have been deployed for a long period of time have to get to know their children all over again. The

service member may not understand the changes that have occurred during his/her absence and feel as though the family should simply pick up where they left off before the deployment occurred (SOFAR, guide, 2005). Of course, all these issues are exacerbated in instances where the returning service member has been psychologically or physically wounded during the deployment.

### **Linking Deployment to the Grief Process**

D'Andrea and Daniels (1992) parallel a child's loss of a parent due to military deployment to the stages in the grief process. During the first phase, children may experience a psychological numbness and almost disbelief of having a parent deployed to war. As one child noted, "I don't think it has really sunk in yet 'cause I keep thinking my dad will be there like he usually is when I get home from school" (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1992, p. 270). This numbness phase initially helps defend children from the painful feelings and dangers associated with having a parent at war.

As children become more aware of their feelings of sadness and loneliness, they enter the yearning phase. During this phase, children may be experiencing separation anxiety and exhibit physical behaviors such as restlessness, agitation, insomnia, nightmares, and uncontrollable crying, as well as physical aches and pains. For instance, one child commented, "My mom is in the Army and she left for war last month, and I can't stop thinking about her" (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1992, p. 270). It is also common for children at the yearning phase to outwardly express their feelings of anger and resentment regarding their parent's absence. These emotional outbursts are often directed towards the remaining parent, siblings, teachers, and classmates.

When children realize that, despite their wishes, being reunited with their deployed parent will not happen during the imminent future, they enter the disorientation and depression phase. Becoming aware of this separation reality causes some children to become increasingly depressed and apathetic (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1992). Counselors and parents may notice a dramatic decrease in the child's interest in school, peer, and family activities during this phase.

### **Fostering Resiliency**

It is important during each of the deployment phases for counselors and parents to give children time, support, and the opportunity to talk about their confusion, sadness, and anger concerning their current family situation. In doing so, children are able to make sense of and work through their thoughts and feelings and enter the reorganization phase. The good news is that, with ample support, children can be very resilient and most are able to cope with a parent's deployment without experiencing long-term negative psychological effects (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1992).

Counselors and therapists have recently gone beyond the notion of merely adjusting and coping with loss by examining the growth potential that underlies an experience such as deployment. Metaphorically speaking, resilience is characterized by the "ability of a person to bounce back after being knocked down by adversity" (Echterling & Stewart, 2008b, p. 192). Despite the stress of being separated from their loved one during a deployment, many children not only exhibit resiliency, but make significant personal and developmental gains. A study examining the positive impact of military family life concluded that for a child, the experience of deployment can promote maturity, increase self-insight, foster independence, increase flexibility, and strengthen

family bonds (Military Child Education Coalition, 2001). Additionally, the experience of deployment can help children build coping skills for dealing with separations and losses later in life.

### **Age Differences in Child Reactions**

There are several factors, such as age, maturity, gender, and relationship with other family members, that affect how children respond to having a parent deployed. Perhaps the most important factor in predicting a child's ability to cope with a parent's deployment is the age of the child. Much of how children experience and comprehend their world is based on their developmental level. As such, a toddler will not be able to understand a parent's deployment in the same way that a preschool child would, nor will a school-age child be able to cope with feelings in the same manner as a teenager would (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003).

Separation appears to be especially difficult for younger children. An estimated 1.3 million children with parents in the military are under the age of six. According to Amen and Jellen (1988), it is common for preschool age children to express feelings of guilt, believing that they are the cause of their parents' leaving. For example, the four-year-old son of a Navy sailor told his father that "he would be a good boy if he wouldn't go away to sea" (Amen & Jellen, 1988, p. 442). Preschool age children may also exhibit such behaviors as clinging to remaining parent/caretaker, difficulties sleeping, irritability, and attention seeking behaviors.

Elementary school-age children frequently experience feelings of sadness, anger, grief, and abandonment when separated from a parent. They exhibit clinging behaviors, angry outbursts, and regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking, crying for attention,

and bed wetting (Amen & Jellen, 1988). Middle schoolers often feel a compelling sense of loss. They can be happy, sad, troubled, and angry all within a relatively brief time period. They are prone to exhibit aggressive tendencies and acting out behaviors. The middle school years are also a time when children strongly identify with their same sex parent; boys wanting to be just like dad or girls wanting to be just like mom. If the same sex parent is the one who is deployed, it is especially difficult for the child (Amen & Jellen, 1988). Teenagers are a challenging age group and experience a period of intense emotions under normal circumstances. Therefore, the added stress of having a parent deployed only exacerbates these emotions. Teens may express feelings of sadness, rejection, and anger or deny having any feelings at all regarding the matter. Adolescents often adopt an aloof or an “I don’t care” attitude to mask their true feelings. Some teens also turn to drugs and alcohol in an attempt to subdue their painful feelings.

The following are the most common emotional and behavioral reactions to having a parent deployed overseas among children of all ages:

### *Feelings*

Fear – “What if something bad happens?”

Helplessness – “There’s nothing I can do about any of this.”

Anger – “Why does my mom/dad have to go?”

Confusion – “What is happening? I don’t understand this at all.”

Loneliness – “I don’t want you to leave me.”

### *Behaviors*

Aggressiveness – at home and school, with playmates and siblings

Acting Out – attention seeking or oppositional behavior



Regression – sleep disturbances, thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums

Withdrawal – quiet, reclusive, loss of interest in activities and friends

(Hooah 4 Health, 2008)

A study by Jensen, Martin, and Watanabe (1996) was the first to document a gender difference in reactions, noting that boys were more likely than girls to experience increased feelings of responsibility for filling the role of the deployed parent, aggression, abandonment, antisocial behaviors, and symptoms of anxiety and depression during deployment. This finding held true even after controlling for the age of the child.

Children are also greatly influenced by how others react. For example, a child will usually cope better with the deployment if the remaining parent/caregiver is coping well and approaches the topic in a positive, supportive way (Educator's guide, n.d.). In an effort to protect and spare young children from getting upset, many parents do not discuss the impending departure with their preschool and elementary school-age children. The literature resoundingly shows that this is a bad idea and actually has the opposite result. The well-intentioned attempt to not worry the child has been shown to have adverse consequences, making the child more confused, anxious, and upset following the departure (Amen & Jellen, 1988). As such, school counselors should encourage parents to actively engage in age appropriate family discussions regarding the impending deployment.

### **Implications for School Counseling**

Schools can be a place of stability, routine, and normalcy, providing an anchor for children experiencing the deployment of a parent or loved one (Educator's guide, n.d.). Although the Department of Defense operates 58 schools across the country for children

living on military bases, only 20% of military children attend such schools. The remaining 80% of military children attend civilian schools, posing a unique challenge for public school systems and the counselors working within them (Hardy, 2008).

Within the school setting, the school counselor is in the best position to provide support services to children who are experiencing a military deployment of a parent. Actively reaching out to military children and teaching them new coping skills for managing their intense feelings and emotions can be very beneficial during each phase of the deployment. Given the opportunity to talk openly about their current family situation, children are able to make sense of and work through their thoughts and feelings.

### **Activity Guide Overview**

In the following section, I will offer a series of activities school counselors can utilize when working with students who are experiencing the military deployment of a loved one. These activities are divided into three sections based on the target audience and include individual interventions, group interventions, and school-wide interventions. The interventions presented in this project are geared toward elementary and middle school students, include step-by-step instructions, require minimal outside materials, and can be completed within forty-five minutes or less.

#### **Individual interventions**

It is important to give children many different avenues for expressing themselves while working through the deployment cycle. On an individual basis, school counselors can provide a variety of opportunities for children to express their feelings, make meaning of their experience, and cope with the absence of their loved one. One way to help children share their stories is through the use of art. By asking a child to draw or

paint their experiences or feelings about the deployment, you are given a glimpse into their inner world... their fears, frustrations, strengths, hopes, and dreams. The child may then choose to send their art to their deployed loved one, which could segue into a letter writing activity.

According to Rush and Akos (2007), letter writing can serve as an important coping tool, can help the child feel more in control, and can provide an alternate method for expressing feelings. For an example of a letter writing activity refer to Appendix A, Activity 1. Older children may benefit from other writing activities such as journaling, which allows them to record their story by transforming their life experiences into words.

Receiving pictures, cards, and letters from the child also enables the deployed parent to feel more connected and up to date with what is going on in the child's life. One way to help record the child's daily activities during the parent's deployment is to create a keepsake box (Appendix A, Activity 2). During this activity the student has the opportunity to decorate a shoebox and then fill it with pictures, art work, school work, personal notes, cards, or letters, and other various mementos. Once the keepsake box is complete, the student may choose to keep it for themselves, send it to their deployed loved one overseas, or save it to give to their loved one when they return home from the deployment.

Children experience a range of powerful emotions when coping with the absence of a loved one due to military deployment. The Worry Balloons activity (Appendix A, Activity 3) is designed to help children regulate their emotions, identify concerns and worries, and practice the relaxation technique of deep breathing. During this activity, the student is given a balloon and asked to imagine a worry or concern that they would like

to let go of. These worries can be related to the deployment, school, or life in general. The student is then instructed to take a deep breath in and exhale slowly, releasing their worry and tension into the balloon. The counselor can repeat this process with the student until the balloon is fully inflated, discussing each of the worries the student was able to release.

As noted previously, children can be very resilient despite the stress of being separated from their loved one during a deployment. Both the stretching activity and the courage bracelet activity (Appendix A, Activities 4 & 5) help to illustrate the concept of resiliency in a kid-friendly manner. In the stretching activity the student is given a large rubber band and told to stretch it as far as they can without breaking it. They are then instructed to slowly release the rubber band and watch as it returns to its original shape. The counselor can discuss with the student how, at times, they too may feel stretched when they encounter something that is hard to grasp or understand, such as the deployment of a loved one. However, if they can find a way to cope with the situation and return to their original state or condition, they are demonstrating resilience. The courage bracelet activity demonstrates a similar concept by asking students to create a bracelet by adding a bead for each time they have been courageous or demonstrated resiliency during their loved one's deployment.

Children often report feeling sad and lonely while their parent is deployed. The Pocket Pals activity is designed to help comfort children during their loved one's absence (Appendix 1, Activity 6). Using a craft or popsicle stick, the student can create a new "pal" to carry with them throughout the day. These pals are small enough to fit in the

student's pocket and are easily accessible to help comfort them during times when they are feeling sad or lonely or simply missing their deployed loved one.

The final individual activity allows students to create personalized dog tags (Appendix 1, Activity 7). Dog tags are a commonly recognized symbol among military families. This set of metal tags is worn by all service members and often carries a sentimental value as an extended representation of the self. In this activity, students have the opportunity to create their own set of dog tags which display their name and birthday as well as fun facts about them.

### **Group interventions**

One of the most efficient ways for school counselors to reach out to multiple students at a time is to organize a small counseling group comprised of six to eight children who all have a parent in the military. The experience of being in a group with their peers who are facing a similar issue provides students with a forum to share their concerns and offer support to others. For military children, the group experience may help to normalize deployment related issues and provide students the opportunity to gain shared insights and coping strategies. Although not all of the group members will have exactly the same feelings or experiences, it is reassuring to know that there are other people at school who understand what they are going through. A variety of group activities are presented in Appendix B. These interventions can be used as either standalone activities or as lessons for a structured six-week counseling group.

The first group activity, Pipe Cleaner Characteristics (Appendix B, Activity 1), helps students develop an understanding of military lifestyle as well as identify positive characteristics of military families. For this activity, students are given pipe cleaners and

asked to describe how they are similar and different from each other. After the students have shared their observations, the counselor can point out that the pipe cleaners are like military families. There are similarities and differences among military families but most importantly, like the pipe cleaners, they are flexible. The counselor can then focus the group discussion on the importance of flexibility and what it means for each student and his or her family.

The Where in the World activity (Appendix B, Activity 2) helps educate students about the country where their deployed loved one is temporarily living. Learning about their loved one's surroundings may help students cope with the separation. During this activity, students have the opportunity to locate their loved one's deployment location on a world map. Students can then use the internet to look up information about that location and record their answers on the Where in the World worksheet.

Having a loved one deployed brings about an array of emotions. Counselors can use the Feeling Finder cards and the Sea Sick Word Scramble (Appendix B, Activity 3) to help students identify and work through these feelings. The Feelings Finder cards introduce students to a variety of feeling words. By asking each group member to select a card and describe a time when they felt that way, students are able to recognize their own positive and negative feelings regarding their loved one's absence. The Sea Sick Word Scramble serves a similar purpose, but goes beyond just naming feelings and provides students with ideas for ways to cope with their feelings.

Students with a deployed loved one often report feeling lonely or isolated. The yarn activity (Appendix B, Activity 4) is a great way to help students identify individuals in their support network. In this activity, students pass a ball of yarn back and forth between group members while sharing the names of the people who have helped or

supported them while their loved one has been deployed. These people may include relatives, friends, teachers, classmates, and members of the community. Each time the ball is passed, the web becomes stronger and stronger. After each student has identified at least two people in their support network, the counselor can point out that the group members are now connected by the web and that they too can be sources of support for one another.

The next group activity focuses on change. Change is an inevitable part of the deployment cycle. When one member of a family is removed the entire system is altered. The Coping with Change handout (Appendix B, Activity 5) encourages students to reflect on the changes they have experienced since their loved one left for deployment. Students are also asked questions pertaining to new routines and responsibilities brought about by the deployment.

The final group activity addresses the student's conflicting emotions regarding their loved one's return home from the deployment. Despite their feelings of excitement, students are often nervous and unsure of what to expect after the much anticipated reunion. The reunion worksheet (Appendix B, Activity 6) helps students name their feelings as well as generate ideas for things they would like to do with their loved one once they return.

### **School-wide interventions**

From a systems perspective, there are a number of school-wide programs and activities that allow children to express their patriotism as well as show support for their fellow classmates. According to Harrison and Vannest (2008), school-wide support for

military children should focus on creating a stable, supportive school climate that provides opportunities for learning for all students.

One way schools can to show support for the members of the U.S. military is to sponsor a product drive. A letter can be sent home with students asking parents to collect items that can be shipped overseas to deployed service members. Schools may also widen the scope of the project and elicit community participation by asking area business and civic organizations to donate items. For a list of suggested items to include in military care packages see Appendix C, Activity 1.

Another way to honor military service is to observe Yellow Ribbon week. Yellow ribbons are a nationally recognized symbol of support for the U.S. military. The school counselor can make copies of the ribbon template (Appendix C, Activity 2) and ask students to express their patriotism and convey their appreciation for military service members by decorating their own ribbon. The counselor can then designate an area of the school (hallway, lobby, cafeteria, etc.) where students can display their ribbon creations.

On a more local scale, schools can help students recognize the service of their own family members by creating a Wall of Honor. Students can participate in this activity by bringing in a photograph of their loved one who is serving in the military. Ask each student to attach the photo of their loved one to the Wall of Honor worksheet (Appendix C, Activity 3) and fill in the blanks with information such as the individuals name and relation to student. Designate a space in the school to display the photos and become the official Wall of Honor.

Each year, November 11<sup>th</sup> is recognized as a day of remembrance and appreciation for the men and women who have served this county. In 2007, the History



Channel piloted the Take a Veteran to School program which encourages schools to invite veterans to come speak with students about their life experiences. Not only is this a great way to thank the veterans for their service, it is also a great learning experience for the students. According to the History Channel, the goal of the Take a Veteran to School program is to teach students about the sacrifices veterans have made and create a historical record of the veterans' experiences through storytelling. (See Appendix C, Activity 4)

The final school-wide activity allows students to express their patriotism by coloring the American Flag (Appendix C, Activity 5). When working with younger students teachers can also use this activity as an opportunity to discuss the characteristics of the flag, its history, and significance. One way to begin this discussion would be to ask students what the American Flag means to them.

In addition to providing activities for students, it is also important to educate other school personnel about the emotional reactions and specific behaviors related to having a deployed parent. An article written by a first grade teacher, Megan Allen, stresses the importance of school wide education on how to support children affected by military deployment. Allen notes that many teachers are trying to educate emotionally distracted children and feel ill equipped to address their special needs. One teacher, whose class includes two children with a deployed parent, expressed that "I feel helpless. I have no idea what it is like to have a loved one away or [to face] the possibility that he or she may not come home. I don't know what I could possibly say or do to help these kids" (Allen & Staley, 2007, p. 83).

### **Additional Resources**

In addition to advocating for children within the school building, counselors should also make themselves aware of the community programming available to military families. Just as with teachers, it is important to educate the remaining parent/caregiver about what resources are available and where to go for help (Horton, 2005). The military provides a variety of programs, such as Family Readiness Groups, designed to assist families experiencing deployment but there are also a variety of resources and programs in place across the country. A list of these resources can be found in Appendix D.

### **Conclusion**

With no end in sight to the conflicts in the Middle East, the number of children and families impacted by the military deployment of a loved one will continue to rise. In the coming years, there is likely to be more research conducted regarding the impact of deployment in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Likewise, the population of military children attending public schools will escalate. Even if the school district is not located near a military base, statistics show a likelihood that there will be one or two students per school, at minimum, who are experiencing a military deployment within their family. Undoubtedly, school counselors will continue to serve an integral role in creating a safe and supportive school environment for the military child. My hope is that school counselors can utilize this guide to not only increase their knowledge of the obstacles facing military families, but to learn new and effective ways to engage military children and help them navigate the challenging life experience of having a loved one deployed.

## Appendix A: Individual Activities

## Activity 1: Letter to My Parent

Help students draft a letter to give to their parent or loved one before they leave for deployment.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Before you leave on this deployment would you please do this with me

\_\_\_\_\_

Please do not forget that I like \_\_\_\_\_

While you are gone I will try very hard to \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

At school I will \_\_\_\_\_

While you're away, I expect to be busy doing \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes when it is very quiet I think/worry about \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I promise to write to you while you are gone. Please write to me and tell me about

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Love, \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity 2: Keepsake Box

**Materials:** Shoebox with lid  
Paint, markers, or crayons  
Construction paper  
Glue  
Scissors  
Decorative items (glitter, stickers, pictures, magazine/newspaper clippings)

**Activity:** Provide the student a shoebox and choice of decorating materials. While the student is decorating their keepsake box, talk with them about their deployed loved one. Share that they have several choices about how to use the box – they may choose to keep it for themselves, send it to their deployed loved one, or save it to give to their loved one when they return home from the deployment.

**Process:** If the student chooses to keep the box, they can use it as a memory box to keep pictures, letters, or special things their deployed loved one has given or sent to them. When they are feeling sad or lonely they can look through the items in the box. If the student would like to send the box to their deployed love one, they can collect pictures, art work, school work, and personal notes to put in the box. When the box is full, help the student prepare and label it for mailing. Some students may choose to save their keepsake box to present to their loved one when they return home.



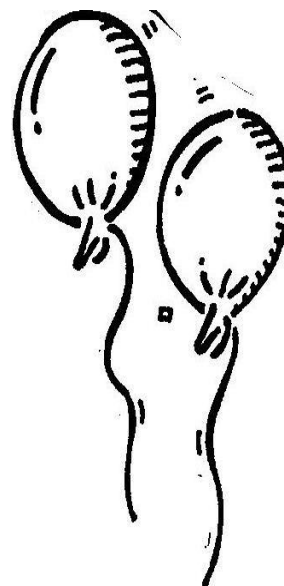
### Activity 3: Worry Balloons

This activity is designed to help children regulate their emotions, identify concerns and worries, and practice the relaxing process of deep breathing.

Materials: Deflated balloons

Activity: Give student a balloon and ask them to imagine a worry or concern they would like to let go of and blow into the balloon. These worries may be related to the deployment, school, or life in general. Instruct the student to take a deep breath and then slowly exhale, releasing their worry and tension into the expanding balloon. Repeat this process until the balloon is inflated.

Process: Once the student has inflated their balloon, talk with them about the worries they were able to release. At the end of the activity the student may decide to pop their balloon, toss it into the air, or take it with them.



\* Alternative group activity: Facilitate the above process with a group of students. When everyone's balloon is inflated, spread a blanket or sheet on the floor and ask the students to gather around it. Invite them to place their balloons in the center of the sheet. Instruct each person to grasp the edge of the sheet and lift it as a group. Point out that they are all carrying the worries together. They can then work together to raise and lower the sheet, tossing their worry balloons into the air.

Adapted from Echterling & Stewart (2008a)

## Resiliency Activities

The following activities help illustrate the concept of resiliency as children strive to overcome life's challenges, such as separation from a loved one.

### Activity 4: Stretching

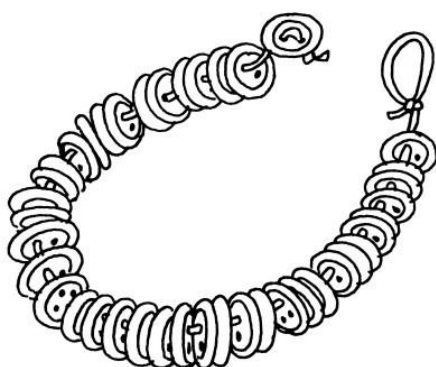
Materials: Large rubber band

Activity: Give student the rubber band and instruct them to stretch it as far as they can without breaking it. Then, ask them to slowly release it and watch while it returns to its original shape/state.

Process: Talk with the student about the concept of resiliency. Much like the rubber band, they may feel stretched when they encounter something that is hard to grasp or understand (such as deployment). However, if they can find ways to cope with the situation and go back to their original shape or condition they are demonstrating resilience.

### Activity 5: Courage Bracelets

Materials: Wooden or plastic beads in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes  
Long pieces of string or yarn

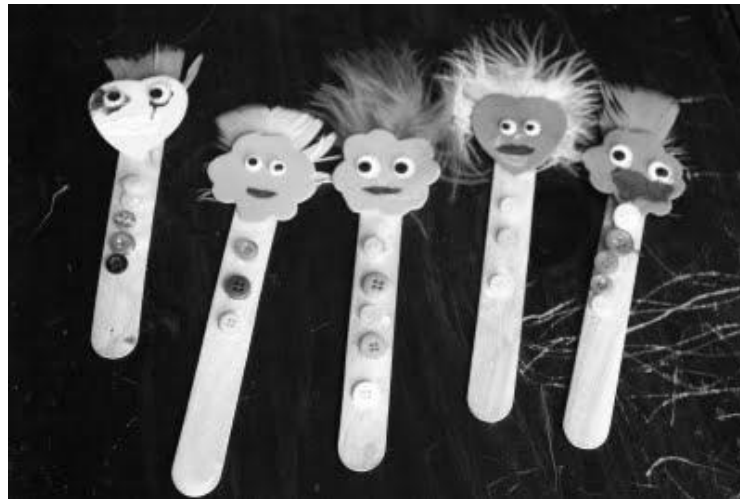


Activity: Allow student to pick out several beads and a piece of string/yarn. Tell the student that you would like them to make a bracelet by adding a bead to the string for each time they have acted courageous and/or demonstrate resiliency during their parents' deployment. Have them describe the act every time they add a bead.

### Activity 6: Pocket Pals

Materials:     Craft or popsicle sticks  
                    Yarn  
                    Glue  
                    Scissors  
                    Construction paper  
                    Paint, markers, or crayons  
                    Miscellaneous craft supplies (beads, buttons, feathers, craft eyes)

Activity: Students can create a pocket pal to carry with them throughout the day. To make a pocket pal start drawing a face on one end of the craft/popsicle stick. Then glue a few pieces yarn on the top of the craft/popsicle to make hair. Students may choose to make clothes for their new pal out of construction paper, adorn them with beads and buttons, or simply color the remaining area of the stick. Students can decorate their pal to look like their deployed love one, a silly character, their favorite animal or pet.





### Activity 7: Dog Tags

Dog tags are a commonly recognized symbol among military families. In this activity, students are given the opportunity to create their own set of dog tags.



Materials: Grey construction paper  
Yarn  
Markers or crayons  
Single hole punch

Activity: Cut two small rectangles out of a sheet of grey construction paper. These will represent the metal portion of the dog tag. Using a single hole punch, make a hole in the top center of each rectangle. Thread a piece of yarn through the hole at the top of each dog tag and knot the two ends together to form a loop. Make sure the loop is large enough to fit around the child's head. Allow the student to color/decorate their dog tags. Students can include personal facts such as their name or birthday as well as fun facts about them.

## Appendix B: Group Activities

### Activity 1: Pipe Cleaner Characteristics

#### Objectives:

1. To assist students to understand military lifestyle and recognize the important, positive characteristics of military families.
2. To increase self-disclosure, build self-esteem, and identify coping behaviors.

Materials: Multicolored pipe cleaners, one per child

Activity: Pass out pipe cleaners. Going around the group, have students describe their pipe cleaners to each other. For example: it bends, it's useful, you can make things with it, it's a bright color, it can be made into a different shape, etc. After each student has described their pipe cleaner, discuss as a group the importance of some of these characteristics. Discuss how pipe cleaners are both similar and different from each other. Then point out that pipe cleaners are like military families. Each military family shares some things in common and has some differences but most importantly, they are flexible! Focus on what this means for each student and his/her family. Are there times when he/she must be flexible due to the parent's schedule? What is special about military families? What is special about their family? Note similarities between the experiences students share and help students connect with one another. How are their families the same and how are they different? Are their parents in the same branch of service? Do they have similar jobs? End the session by asking students to share something special about being a military child.

## Activity 2: Where in the World?

### Objectives:

1. Students will learn about the country where their loved one is temporarily living.
2. Students will feel more connected with the deployed loved one by learning more about his/her surroundings.

Materials:     Where in the World worksheet  
                    World map  
                    Internet or encyclopedia  
                    Writing utensil

Activity: Begin by asking students what they know about different countries in the world. Explain to students that the place where their loved one is deployed is different than the United States. Ask them if they know anything about the country where their loved one is currently working/living. Use a map to help students locate each country and point out its proximity to the United States. Have students look up information about the country either on the computer or by looking through books/encyclopedias. Pass out the Where in the World worksheet for students to record their findings. Encourage students to answer each question and write down any interesting facts.

### *Helpful websites for researching countries:*

[www.worldalmanacforkids.com](http://www.worldalmanacforkids.com)  
[www.academickids.com](http://www.academickids.com)  
[www.deploymentkids.com/world.html](http://www.deploymentkids.com/world.html)  
[www.worldfacts.us](http://www.worldfacts.us)  
[www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)  
[www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com)

## Where in the World?



1. Mark where you live on the above map. Now mark the place where your loved one is currently deployed. Draw a line between the two countries.
2. In what country is your loved one temporarily living? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What type of job is your loved one doing there? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the country's capital? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the country's main language? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the population? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is the weather like there? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Is there a time difference? If so, what is it? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What types of food do they eat? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Write down as many other interesting facts as you can find \_\_\_\_\_

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### Activity 3: Feelings

#### Objectives:

1. Students will learn to understand their positive and negative feelings, both in general and in regard to deployment.
2. Students will brainstorm different solutions to deal with their feelings and form connections with other students based on these feelings.

Materials:     Feeling finder cards  
                    Sea Sick word scramble  
                    Crayons  
                    Writing utensil

Activity: Begin by discussing feelings in general. Have students name different types of feelings. Talk about the difference between positive and negative feelings. Emphasize that it is okay to have both positive and negative feelings, but that it is important to know how to cope with negative feelings in a healthy way.

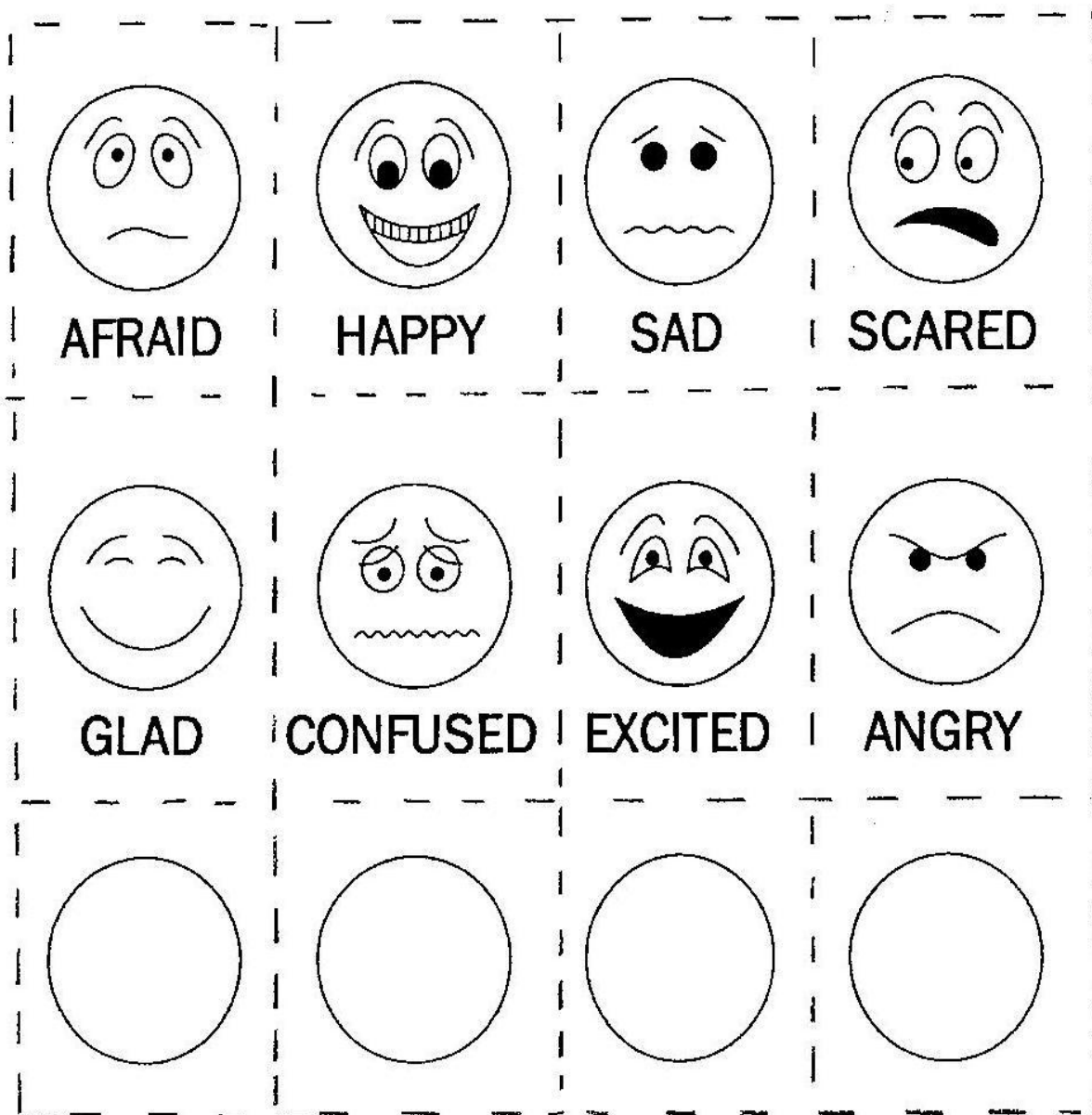
Have students take turns picking a feeling finder card. Have each student read the feeling on their card and say whether it is a positive or negative feeling. Ask the student to share a time when he/she had that feeling. Did he/she share it with anyone? Help students to connect emotions with thoughts, behaviors, etc.

After each student has had a turn to share their feeling pass out the Sea Sick word scramble handout. Go over instructions and give students time to unscramble the feeling words. Once they have unscrambled the words, ask them to color in the arrows of the emotions they have felt since their loved one has been deployed. Ask students to share one of their feelings regarding deployment and how they are coping with that feeling. Make connections between group members who express similar feelings.

Make a list of the feelings identified by the group. In one column write the feeling. In another column have students brainstorm ideas for things to do if you are having that feeling. Focus on how students can turn negative feelings into positive feelings.

Adapted from Virginia Military Family Services Board (2003)

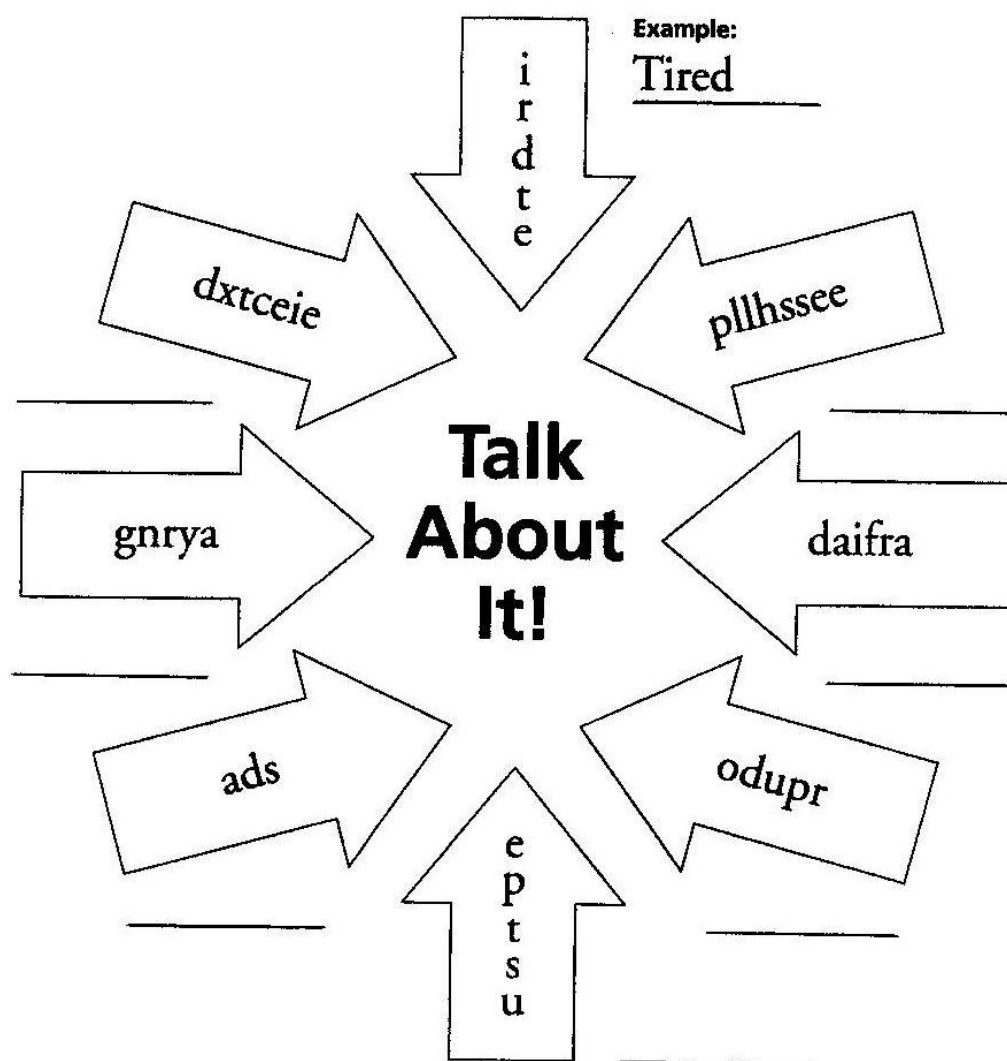
## Feeling Finder Card Cutouts



### Sea Sick Word Scramble

It is important to be aware of your feelings and be willing to share your feelings while your parent is away. If you don't talk about the thoughts and feelings that you are experiencing, you may feel like things are scrambled on the inside.

*Directions:* Unscramble the examples of different types of feelings you may have when your loved one is away on deployment and write your answer on the line by the arrow.



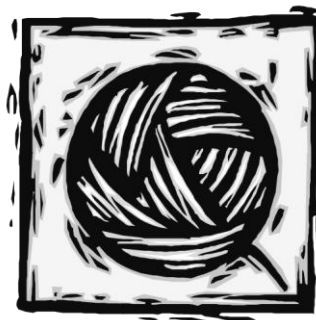


### Activity 4: Support Network

Objective:

1. Students will identify sources of strength and support within their communities, families, and friendships.

Materials: A large ball of brightly colored yarn



Activity: Tell students that they are going to use the ball of yarn to build a web, which will show how people have helped or supported them while their loved one has been deployed. To begin, ask the students to sit/stand in a circle. One person in the group is instructed to hold one end of the yarn and toss the ball to another person in the circle. The person receiving the ball should say the name of someone who has helped them and tell what the support was. This may include relatives, friends, teachers, classmates, or community members. They will then hold the yarn with one hand and toss the ball to another person with the other hand. That person will also name someone who has helped him/her and tell what the support was. Repeat this process until each group member has identified at least two people in their support system. As each person shares, the web becomes stronger and stronger. After everyone has shared, discuss how the group members are connected by the web and how they too can be sources of support for one another.

### Activity 5: Coping with Change

#### Objectives:

1. Students will recognize the differences and similarities in their everyday life since the deployment occurred.
2. Students will discuss strategies for continuing old routines and adjusting to new ones.

Materials: Coping with Change worksheet  
Writing utensil

*Directions:* Fill in the blanks in the sentences below.

1. Since my loved one left for deployment, these things have changed \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
2. These things are the same \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
3. What new routines have you and your family adopted since the deployment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. How do you feel about these new routines? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What new skills have you developed to help you cope with the deployment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What (if any) new or extra responsibilities do you have as a result of the deployment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How do you feel about these added responsibilities? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Since my \_\_\_\_\_ deployed, I have learned that I can \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from Rush & Akos (2008)

### Activity 6: Reunion

Objective:

1. Students will recognize their feelings regarding their loved one's return from deployment.

Materials: Reunion worksheet  
Writing utensil

As reunion day nears, the excitement and tension will continue to build. This is a good time to think about how you feel about your loved one coming home.

*Directions:* Fill in the blanks in the sentences below.

1. I feel \_\_\_\_\_ that my loved is coming home because \_\_\_\_\_.
2. I'm a little worried about \_\_\_\_\_.
3. I can't wait to tell my loved one about \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The first thing I want to show my loved one is \_\_\_\_\_.
5. When my loved one comes home I hope we have time to \_\_\_\_\_ together.
6. One thing I'm not looking forward to is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

Adapted from Channing Bete Company (2006)

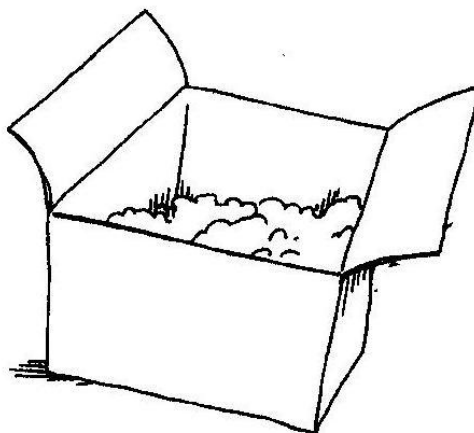
## Appendix C: School-Wide Activities

## Activity 1: Care Packages

Students can collect items as a school or class to send to deployed service members. Below is a list of suggested items to include in care packages.

### ***Foods***

Dry cereal  
Instant oatmeal  
Crackers  
Cookies  
Beef jerky  
Single serve chips  
Snack cakes  
Dried/canned fruit  
Nuts  
Hard candy  
Bubble gum  
Lollipops  
Granola bars  
Canned soup  
Canned tuna/chicken  
Kraft Easy Mac  
Instant/powered drink mix (coffee, tea, Gatorade, Kool-Aid)  
Condiment packets (ketchup, mustard, mayo, hot sauce, salt/pepper, sugar)

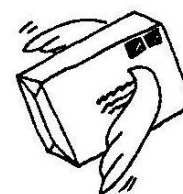


### ***Toiletries***

Shampoo/Conditioner  
Soap  
Body wash  
Toothpaste  
Toothbrush  
Mouthwash  
Dental floss  
Deodorant  
Lotion  
Baby wipes  
Baby powder  
Shaving cream  
Razors  
Q-tips  
Hair brush/comb  
Chapstick  
Eye drops  
Feminine hygiene products

### ***Other***

Sunscreen  
Socks  
Medicine (Advil, Tylenol, Cold/Cough, Antacids)  
Batteries  
Deck of cards  
Disposable camera  
Flash light  
Books/Magazines  
Ziploc bags  
Insect repellent  
Laundry detergent  
Air freshener  
Nail file/clippers  
Pictures  
Cards/Letters

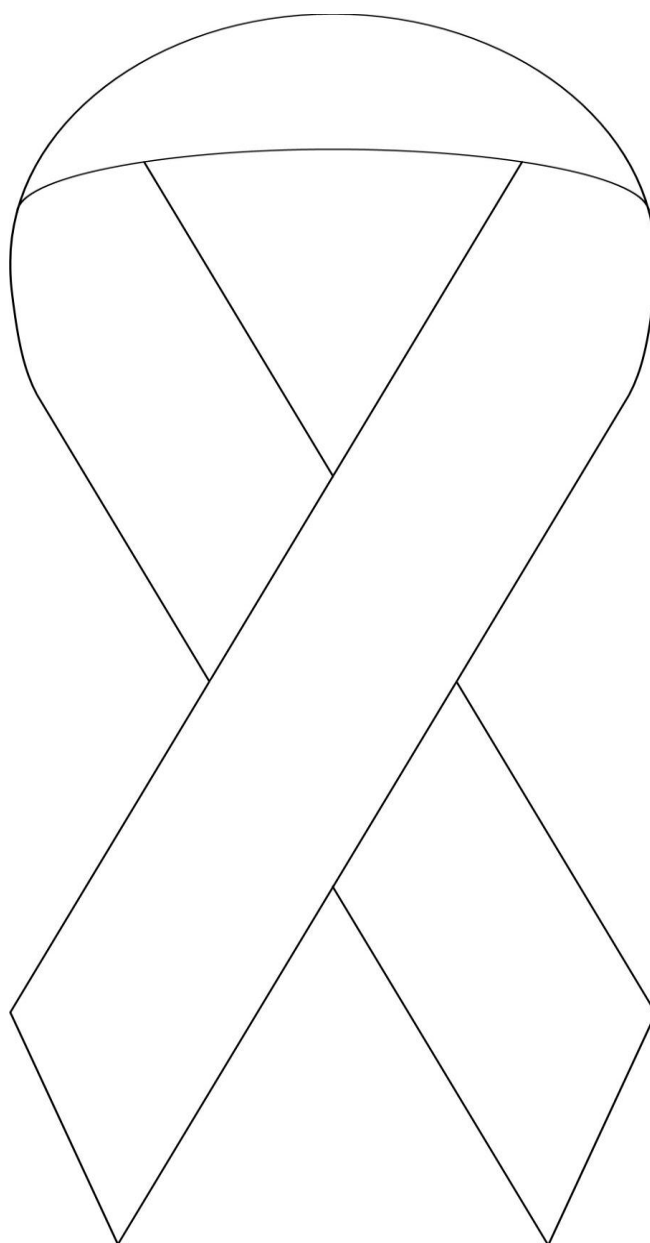


An extensive list of items can be found at <http://www.operationmilitarypride.org/packages.html>

## Activity 2: Yellow Ribbon

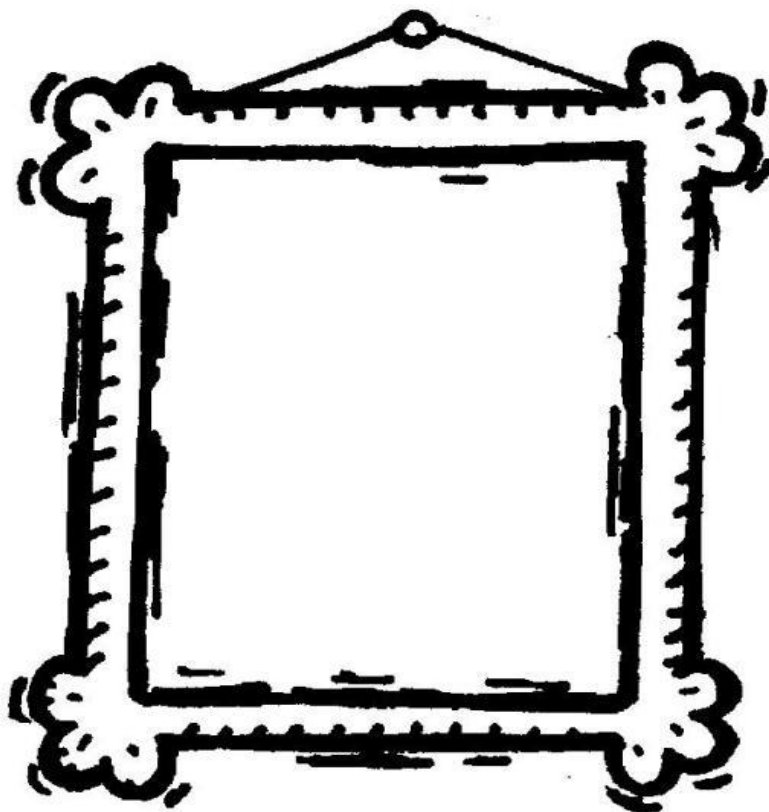
Yellow ribbons are a nationally recognized symbol of support for military members serving overseas. Copy the template below and ask students to color/decorate/design their own Yellow Ribbon. Designate an area in the school where students can show support for service members by displaying their ribbon creations.

# Yellow Ribbon



### Activity 3: Wall of Honor

Ask students to bring a photograph of their loved one who is currently deployed overseas or serving in the military. Hand out Wall of Honor worksheets and explain to students that this is an opportunity for them to honor their loved one. Ask each student to attach their loved one's photo and fill out the information on the worksheet. Explain that this sheet will be put on the Wall of Honor so that everyone can learn about their deployed family member.



This is \_\_\_\_\_

He/she is my \_\_\_\_\_

I am proud of him/her because: \_\_\_\_\_

An interesting fact about him/her is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite thing to do with him/her is: \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from Aydlett (2008)

#### Activity 4: Take a Veteran to School Day

Objectives:

1. Teach students about the sacrifices veterans have made.
2. Create a historical record of veterans' varied experiences through storytelling.

Bringing veteran service members into your school is not only a great way to honor their service and sacrifice, it is a great learning experience for the students. In an effort to encourage this type of activity, The History Channel is partnering with local schools to offer the Take a Veteran to School Day program. This program is often done in conjunction with Veteran's Day, which is observed on November 11<sup>th</sup> each year. Your school can ask students to invite their parents or family members who have served in the military or reach out to other veterans living in your local community.

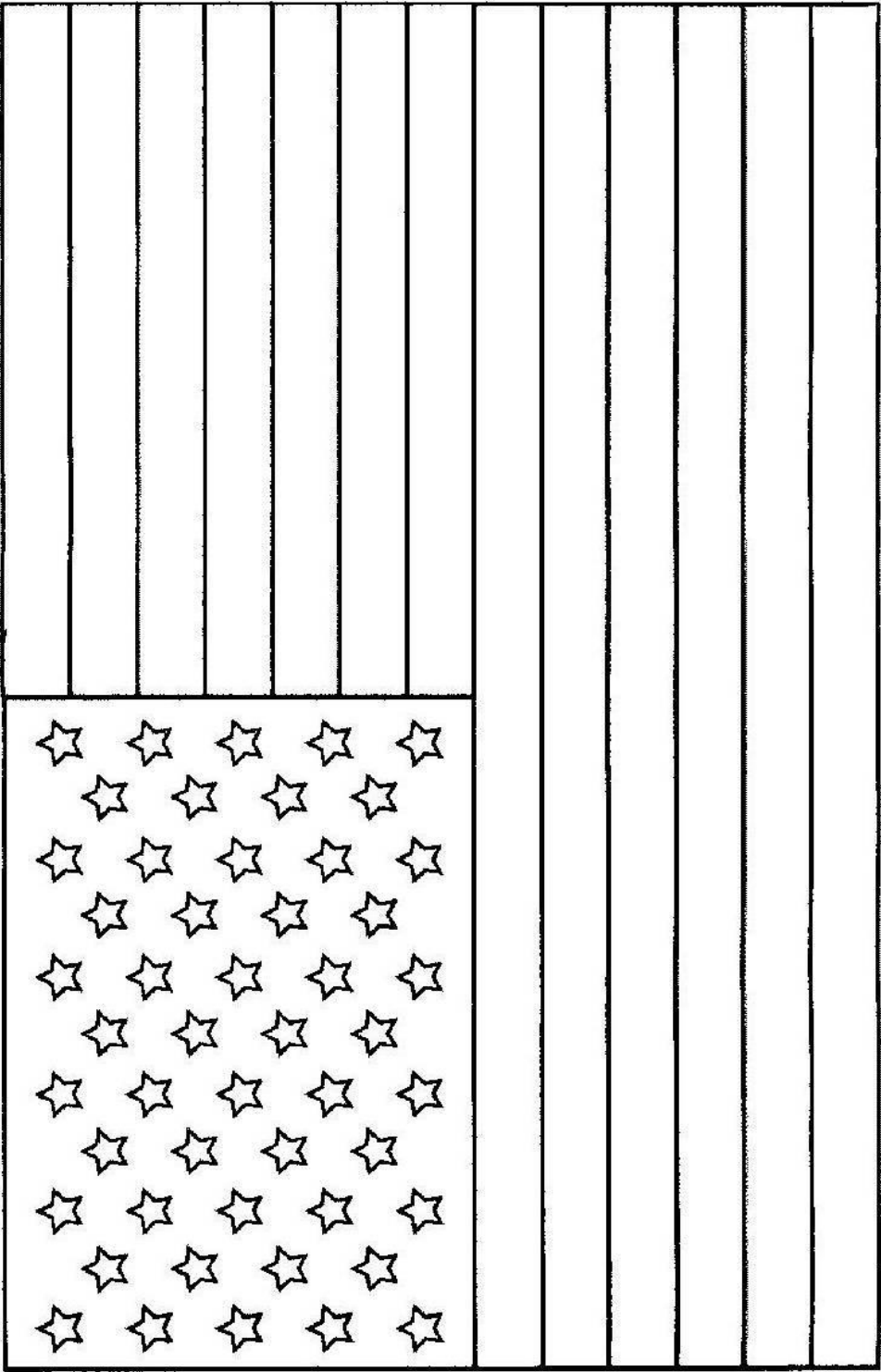
More information about Take a Veteran to School Day as well as a complete planning guide is available at <http://www.history.com/content/veterans>





Activity 5: American Flag

American Flag



## Appendix D: Resources

### **Children's Books**

A Paper Hug by Stephanie Skolmoski and Anneliese Bennion

A Yellow Ribbon for Daddy by Anissa Mersiowsky

Deployment Journal for Kids by Rachel Robertson

Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom by Lisa Tucker McElroy

Mommy You're My Hero & Daddy You're My Hero by Michelle Ferguson-Cohen

My Red Balloon by Eve Bunting

Night Catch by Brenda Ehrmantraut

Red, White and Blue, Good-bye by Sarah Wones Tomp

We Serve Too! A Child's Deployment Book by Kathleen Edlick

When Dad's at Sea by Mindy Pelton

### **Websites**

Operation Military Kids  
[www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org)

Military Child Education Coalition  
<http://www.militarychild.org>

Military OneSource  
<http://www.militaryonesource.com>

National Military Family Association  
<http://www.militaryfamily.org>

### **Videos**

Sesame Street - Talk, Listen, Connect & Deployments, Homecomings, Changes  
<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/initiatives/emotion/tlc>

Mr. Poe & Friends  
<http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/videos.html>

Military Youth Coping with Separation: When Family Members Deploy  
<http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/videos.html>

### **Other**

Flat Daddies/Mommies  
<http://www.flatdaddies.com>

Operation Purple Summer Camp  
<http://www.operationpurple.org>

Dog Tags for Kids  
<http://www.dogtagsforkids.com>

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