

## How to reach out to military families

By [Meredith Moss](#), Staff Writer

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MIAMISBURG — Karen Bruce-Alexander will spend this Mother's Day alone.

"My soldiers are both doing what they love, serving this great country of ours," says the Miamisburg woman whose daughter, Rachel, is a technical sergeant with the Air National Guard in Texas, her son, Jacob, is an Army infantryman serving in Afghanistan.

Watching her youngest child leave for war, she says, was the toughest time in her life.

"They have always both wanted to serve and so, as a parent, I have stood by them and supported their decisions," Bruce-Alexander says. "I couldn't be any prouder than I am."

But she admits it's a very lonely time and believes mothers need to stay connected. She's found that connection through Blue Star Mothers.

"We are an organization that helps support one another while having a child serve — whether here in the states or abroad," she said.

Those who aren't in the military can reach out to military families in a variety of ways. That's the idea behind Joining Forces, the national initiative recently launched by first lady Michelle Obama and second lady Jill Biden. The project's goals are to "enhance the well-being and mental health of the military family, ensure excellence in military children's educations and develop career and educational opportunities for military spouses, and increase child care availability."

Sociologist and author BJ Gallagher is a military brat who remembers lying awake at night worrying whether her daddy was going to get killed.

The Los Angeles author says a military mom has to deal with her own stress, anxiety and fear, and at the same time, be a support system for her children. Moms in uniform, she adds, struggle with the pain of separation from their youngsters, knowing that they are missing out on important developmental milestones in their children's lives.

"They have to deal with feelings of guilt, not able to be present when their kids need help with illness, school problems, difficulties in social and emotional adjustment," she says.

Gallagher urges civilian families to reach out to military families, especially those with a deployed spouse.

"Seek them out, find them in your neighborhoods, and build friendships with them," she urges. "Offer to baby-sit for their kids, invite the military kids for play dates and sleepovers, invite a military family to share holiday meals with your family. Offer to tutor military kids who need a little extra help in school, offer to carpool for school, sports and after-school events."

Gallagher advises the rest of us to keep an eye out for military moms who may be in distress: Sometimes evidenced by drinking too much, eating disorders, abuse of prescription medications, compulsive shopping, promiscuity or acting out in other ways.

"Do not judge these women," she urges. "Reach out and offer compassion, understanding, support and referral

to support groups and/or other professional therapy or medical care.”

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