

Discussions / Live Q&A's

JUNE 22, 2011, 12:00 P.M.

The Mil Life: The hardest part of being in a military family

Sometimes, no matter how much support you have, being in a military family is just plain hard. A servicemember's deployment can create temporary single parenthood, financial distress, emotional trauma and leave you in situations (like being a caretaker of a wounded veteran) that you never thought possible.

Meet Stephanie Himel-Nelson. As a military child, spouse and mother, she knows about the hardships that come along with military service.

Help Stephanie kick off this new weekly chat series dedicated to military families, including servicemembers, spouses, children and parents!

- **Tell Stephanie** what hardships you often face as a military family member and give other chatters some advice of your own.
- **Ask Stephanie for advice!** After all, she has 30 years of experience playing the roles of child, spouse and mother.
- **Suggest topics** for future military family chats. This is the first of what we hope will be many chats focused on hardships military families face every day. This chat is for you. Tell us what you'd like to talk about, or what you think would benefit the military community.

Check out these military resources for you and your family!

[Blue Star Families](#)
[Military Officers Association of America](#)
[USO](#)
[Gold Star Wives](#)

The Discussion

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

Happy Wednesday!

I'm Stephanie Himel-Nelson and I'm excited to be hosting this chat today. Being part of a military family can be both incredibly rewarding and sometimes frustrating. Today we'd like to talk about some of the biggest challenges you face as a military family and hear your ideas for future chat topics.

This is my first live chat on the Washington Post, so please bear with me if I'm a little slow while I figure this system out.

— June 22, 2011 11:59 AM

MILITARY LIFE

The hardest part of military life for me as a military mom is seeing my children upset about their Dad's deployment and sad about leaving their schools and friends when it is time to move to the next assignment.

— June 21, 2011 2:59 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

I know that's one of the hardest parts for so many military families. It's always hard to see our kids in pain. But here's a question for you - Do you think that moving will eventually make your kids better people?

— June 22, 2011 12:01 PM

DEPLOYMENT SUPPORT

Hi Stephanie! Support is absolutely essential, although not always enough regardless of the quality and quantity - sometimes you just need your spouse and no one else will do. I grew up in a military household, served on active duty for 20 years, and just celebrated 20 years of marriage to my active duty husband who left two months ago for his 5th year-long deployment. We have four young children so these are issues close to my heart.

For those who are facing the deployment of their service member for the first (or fifth) time, building a support network of friends, family, and neighbors is the most important step to take. You must know who you can call on for help and, more importantly, you must be willing to ask for their help (or accept it when offered). None of us can do this alone. We must also be vigilant for those in our community who need assistance, be it something as simple as picking up a gallon of milk from the grocery store or, more importantly, help in getting to mental health services (Military One Source is amazing) for those who are having difficulty with the stress of this lifestyle.

Thanks again for hosting the chat - I'm looking forward to following along.

— June 21, 2011 5:31 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

Great comment! I know that for many of us, *asking for help is so hard*. I'm guilty of it too, as are my friends. Heck, even one of my best friends had a hard time accepting my help when her husband was deployed and her classes conflicted with her son's t-ball practices. We have to get past being afraid to ask for help and rely on our friends and our community. It makes military life so much more rewarding.

— June 22, 2011 12:05 PM

ABOUT THE HOST



Stephanie Himel-Nelson

Stephanie Himel-Nelson is the communications director for [Blue Star Families](#), a national nonprofit supporting military families. She left her career as an attorney to advocate for military families three years ago and hasn't looked back. Stephanie grew up in the military as an Air Force "brat" and she is still immersed in the military life. Stephanie's husband recently retired after 20 years in the Navy and her brother, a former Army soldier, is now serving in the Ohio National Guard. She lives with her husband and two boys, ages 5 and 6, in Chesapeake, Virginia.

MILITARY SPOUSES

Stephanie, Highly educated military wives (I'm one) struggle to find meaningful careers with a military job assignment system that is arbitrary and apathetic to us at best. As you well know, we are often asked to move to the far corners of the country (and world) for our spouse's career, but absolutely no consideration is given to the civilian spouse's career. I am one military spouse who ended up making the decision to live apart from my husband for several years in order to pursue my career while he was moved around the country and deployed around the world. There is meager career training (My CAA) --mostly technical and not for college educated women --available for military spouses, but this is the 21st century.

When is the military going to catch on to the fact that you can no longer expect women to spend their time solely supporting their husbands careers? Why do we still have a military culture stuck in the 1950s? How much longer until detailers take spouses' career considerations into placement? It just seems to me that this is going to increasingly become an issue as more and more women are equal earning partners with their military husbands. -Frustrated Navy wife

– June 21, 2011 9:03 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

Frustrated Navy Wife – You're right. This is a problem. Heck, it was a problem even when my mom was trying to keep up a teaching career while my dad was in the Air Force 30 years ago. Now, it's even more of an issue. On the plus side, the DoD seems to know that this is a problem and understand that it can seriously impact retention of their service members. Unfortunately, I don't think it's a problem that can be easily solved without completely revamping the way we move and promote our service members. Change and the military are not always friendly bedfellows!

I'm a recovering attorney and moving while practicing law would have been akin to starting over as a first year associate every. single. time. So I can understand why you chose to live apart for some time. It's not just licensing in a new state (or country!) every time you move, it's rebuilding all of your local professional resources, your client base or seniority, and frankly, your income. It's frustrating, I know. You certainly aren't alone in this and I bet others will chime in as soon as they see your questions.

As for spouse education, we could probably do an entire chat on just that! MyCAA is quite limited, but there are a number of spouse scholarships out there as well. Blue Star Families has a [good list](#) you can download via PDF.

– June 22, 2011 12:07 PM

SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES

I wrote a book about how it feels to have a loved one in combat, *Skin in the Game: Journey of a Mother and Her Marine Son*. Three publishers in New York told me it was a compelling story but "no one is interested in war. Marketing would be a problem." So I self-published hoping to let the other 99% of Americans feel war they way we do.

Question: How to get others to care when they aren't involved?

– June 22, 2011 10:20 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

That's a great question. "How to get others to care when they aren't involved?"

Blue Star Families did a military lifestyle survey in 2010 that found that 92% of military families felt that the civilian population doesn't understand or appreciate the sacrifices we make. Now whether that is reality or it's our perception, that's still a problem.

I'm hoping that the answer those NY publishers gave you wasn't what the reality really is. In my experience it isn't. Granted, I live in a very large military community, but working for Blue Star Families I encounter so many people every day who want to know how they can help.

BSF actually has a new program called [Operation Honor Cards](#), which is about getting people involved even if they don't have any "skin in the game." People and organizations can pledge hours of service in their communities in honor of the service and sacrifices of our military families. So far, we've gotten more than 4 million hours of service pledged. I think that's a good sign!

– June 22, 2011 12:13 PM

CHILDREN, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

I'm wondering if you have thoughts regarding the mental health impact of violence and abuse in military families. I know there's a lot of information out there regarding the impact of separation, but with increased numbers of domestic violence incidents in military families, I am wondering if there are any experts out there that are looking at the impact on kids.

With adrenaline, startle responses and trauma triggers playing out for some returning servicemembers, it seems that there may be some distinct differences for kids in military family vs. the general population. Thank you!

– June 22, 2011 5:59 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) has some resources on traumatic grief in children. But I haven't yet seen anything specifically looking at military children and domestic violence. If any of our viewers have, I'm sure they'll weigh in. We do know that secondary PTSD is becoming more common in military families and this could be playing a role. The VA also has some resources on [secondary PTSD for kids](#).

This would be a great topic for a future chat, so thank you so much for bringing it up!

– June 22, 2011 12:16 PM

MAYBE NOT A TYPICAL EXPERIENCE

My husband was on active duty with the Air Force for six years, two of which he was attending the Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. After that we spent four years at Kirtland AFB, NM. He was once sent to Montana for what turned out to be 3 1/2 weeks, but otherwise he was home, kept regular

hours, and enjoyed what he did. I had a great group of friends, AFIT wives, and the bases were great. Housing was very nice, too (we didn't have base housing at W-PAFB, unfortunately, and spent half his pay on rent). The only problem was his low salary the first two years. Medical care was wonderful, so were the commissary and BX. I would do it again in a heartbeat. We loved Dayton & Albuquerque as well.

– June 22, 2011 9:54 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

No actually, I think this is a pretty typical experience so thank you so much for sharing it!

You've hit on one of the best and most rewarding parts of being part of a military family - the community. Military families will come together to aid one of their own at a moment's notice. We volunteer at very high rates. We just help.

You'll make friends like this all over the world. That's something pretty amazing.

– June 22, 2011 12:18 PM

VERY INSENSITIVE COMMENTS

I know these are very insensitive comments and I appreciate and honor military service in our tremendous veterans (my sibling served 10 years). But when service members complain about moving every three years I have to roll my eyes. Periodic transfers have been the policy of the military for many decades, and everyone knew this fact of life in the military before joining. You have to take the good (generous housing allowance) with the bad (periodic transfers). You can't join the military and expect 20 years of 9-5 hours in the same duty station.

– June 22, 2011 8:01 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

It's not necessarily insensitive, but it is something that I think many people looking from the outside think. So let's just address it head on.

Ultimately, ensuring that families are comfortable and more stable will ensure that our military is more resilient and improve readiness.

If a spouse, who may really have had no idea what moving every 2-3 years would mean, is unable to maintain a satisfying career, if the family's children are struggling in school, that service member may get out of the military. Training and recruiting service members is expensive. If you want to look at it from purely a practical standpoint, it makes sense to listen to the concerns of family members about moving every 3 years.

But I'd also like to point out that moving can be a good thing. If we completely set aside the problems moving causes with the spouse's career and children's education, moving can be a positive thing. I was a military brat as well. Although I was a shy and quiet kid, I learned how to make friends; I met a lot of people from different areas of the country; I lived overseas; I saw and did many things other kids don't. I think ultimately it made me a better, more open minded adult. And I was also as proud as can be of my dad. Just as proud as I am of my husband, who served 20 years, and my brother, who is still serving. I think the military life also instills a sense of purpose and patriotism in our kids as well.

I don't think anyone joins the military thinking that they'll work 9-5 and live in the same place for 20 years. But we still need to address the problems that frequent moves cause if we want to retain our best service members.

– June 22, 2011 12:22 PM

OF TWO MINDS?

The words hard, hardship, distress, wounded and trauma appear in the short intro to this chat. It begs the question - did the dangers and challenges of working as a warrior for the world's largest standing military take you by surprise? For whatever reason, your family member opted voluntarily to don the uniform. Depicting the well-documented lifestyle this entailed as a horror is a bit ingenious. Unless you think people should quit these jobs?

– June 22, 2011 8:39 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

See answer above.

And let's remember, when we send our service members off to war for 10 years, we have to deal with the consequences of that. Plus, it's the right thing to do. Let's remember, children don't choose this life.

– June 22, 2011 12:24 PM

SCHOOL TRANSFERS

Are you familiar with efforts to improve something as simple as the transfer of schools records and the appropriate placement of children of military personnel into appropriate classes? Military personnel children often transfer several times and the laws in different states and course offerings in different schools vary. I know some states are moving to allow a child of a military personnel to graduate according to the graduation requirements of the state from which they came, as often students will transfer in their senior year only to discover that state requires courses they were not required to take, and did not school, at their previous schools. This is something military families don't immediately think of, until they are faced with these problems, so we appreciate those working on easing these school transfers.

– June 22, 2011 9:44 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

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Transferring schools has long been an issue for military children. I know I don't have to tell all of you that when a child has to change school every two to three years, problems will come up. (I could go into a rant about what happened to my GPA when I moved from a DoDDS school in Germany to a civilian school in Nebraska in the middle of my sophomore year!) There are also issues for special needs children, or kids with learning disabilities, as well as children on the normal academic track.

Now, we thankfully have the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children

http://www.csg.org/programs/policyprograms/NCIC/interstatecompact_militarychildren_edop.aspx

I believe 36 states have signed on to the compact, which helps to make school transitions more uniform. It covers things such as record transfers, course sequencing, graduation requirements, extra-curricular activities, missed testing, kindergarten and first grade age variations, power of custodial parents while one is deployed, and other things such as data sharing and training.

But it's really more than just academic standards that need to change. Teachers and administrators need to understand a bit more about the military lifestyle and the deployment cycle to make transferring as painless as possible for our kids.

– June 22, 2011 12:44 PM

HALEY CRUM :

From the producer: If you noticed a pause, we're sorry for any inconvenience. We were experiencing some technical difficulties. It looks like everything is fine now! Thank you for your patience.

– June 22, 2011 12:48 PM

WOODBIDGE

My husband came back from a year in Iraq on Monday. I got quite used to being by myself. The hardest part is just the fact that he's there - I keep expecting, and right now, wanting, him to go back.

– June 22, 2011 10:12 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

This comment makes me sad. But I also know you're not alone in this. We all assume that the moment our spouse is back in our arms that we'll pick up where we left off. But it just doesn't work that way. After spending a year or more apart, you need to get to know your spouse again. You've changed, he's changed, so your marriage has changed.

[DCOE has some really great reintegration resources](#), that I recommend you look through. But also give yourself some time. You spent a year apart, it's going to take more than a few days to get back what you missed.

– June 22, 2011 12:49 PM

ENTERING/RETURNING TO COLLEGE

Does anyone find it hard to navigate through getting enrolled in college, and then being a good student once enrolled?

– June 22, 2011 10:33 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

That's a good question, and I hope some people will weigh in with their experiences.

I'd imagine that going back to school after having been in the real world is always hard. When you have to navigate the GI Bill or children and deployments (if you're a spouse) it's probably even harder. On the plus side, many colleges now have someone set aside specifically to help veterans navigate going back to school.

If you're a spouse, it's still hard though, isn't it? As military spouses, we can't really plan much ahead, so the military life can mess with your class schedule, exams, papers, and everything in between. Just make sure your professors and your school knows that you're a military spouse and more about your specific situation. Many people will be as understanding as possible once they know. Good luck!

– June 22, 2011 12:52 PM

AM I CRAZY?

I am not 18 years old (add about 20 years). But I am thinking about enlisting in the Navy. I see lots of pros -- answer the call to serve, get experience and a clearance to enhance my career options working as an engineer for defense contractors, do something different than my 9-to-5 job. The one big con is time away from family. I don't have a good answer to my wife and two young sons about how to cope with my absence. Fortunately the job I am interested in has its A school close to home, so it would initially be just recruit training that would take me away. But there is always a good chance of being deployed, even with Iraq and Afghanistan supposedly

winding down. I come from an Army family, so the idea of a parent being away isn't foreign to me, but it is to wife. Any thoughts on what else I can tell my wife?

– June 22, 2011 9:14 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

This is a hard one.

I'm a military brat so it's hard for me to imagine life without moving and deployments. But for so many people it's completely foreign. And remember that it's got to be even harder for your wife now, X years into marriage with two young sons.

Just keep the lines of communication open. Make sure you listen to her very real concerns about your safety, separation, and how it will affect your family. If you know any military families, encourage her to talk to them and hear first hand what it's like.

I think it's wonderful that you want to serve your country. In a marriage though, two people need to make that decision. Best of luck to you!

– June 22, 2011 12:56 PM

ARMY WIVES

Do you find that at all realistic? I watched part of the first season, but I couldn't believe that colonels' wives were good friends with privates' wives. It wasn't like that when my husband was in the military.

– June 22, 2011 12:52 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

No, I don't find it realistic at all. But I still enjoy it!

– June 22, 2011 12:56 PM

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

Stephanie, I recently retired from the Army. I didn't get married until my 17th year of service, between by second and third deployments to Iraq. My wife was from a non-military community and she admitted that until we got together the war(s) for her were simply an abstraction, something she kind of knew was going on but never really thought about. The truth is that unless one lives in a military community or has an immediate family member involved, there might as well not be a war going on. It's frustrating because none of her peers has any idea how hard it was on her when I was gone.

– June 22, 2011 12:59 PM

CHILDREN DON'T CHOOSE THIS LIFE.

But you did choose to have those children in this life, knowing about transfers and deployments ahead of time.

– June 22, 2011 12:49 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

So we should punish the kids?

Look, no one signs up for 10 years of war, spending half of their kids' lives away from them, PTSD, TBI, other medical issues and everything that comes along with that.

If you don't understand that, there's not much I (or anyone in a military family) can say to you.

– June 22, 2011 12:58 PM

WHY DOES THE CHAT HAVE TO BE ABOUT "HARDSHIPS"?

I'm an Army wife. The military life is what you make of it - why the negative connotation?

– June 22, 2011 12:00 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

This chat is definitely NOT just about hardships. We're all incredibly proud of what our service members do, I believe.

– June 22, 2011 12:59 PM

FUTURE TOPICS

I'd love to see some time devoted to counseling for and by military spouses. Karen SF

– June 22, 2011 11:33 AM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

Great suggestion. Thanks, Karen.

– June 22, 2011 1:00 PM

HARDEST PART

The hardest part of military life for me is the unknown. Not knowing orders, not knowing if he's ok, not knowing what's coming next, not knowing how my children will react...

– June 22, 2011 12:07 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

This was the hardest part for me too. I'm a planner. I like to know exactly where everyone will be, not just now, but 2 years from now. And you have to toss that out

the window with the military!

Not knowing is the worst. I agree.

– June 22, 2011 1:01 PM

REINTEGRATION

I have to second a previous poster's comment about how hard reintegration can be. We see these images on TV of tearful reunions and imagine how wonderful it will be when they get home, but the reality can be quite different. The expectations are so high, but the person you are welcoming home can be almost like a stranger. You may not have seen him for well over a year and very often the service member has had experiences that changes who they are, at least temporarily. Adding to the stress are friends and family who think you must be ecstatic that they are home and can't understand how anything could be wrong now that they are home. It is important to keep expectations low and take things slow. Marine Wife of 10 Years and 4 Deployments

– June 22, 2011 1:01 PM

STEPHANIE HIMEL-NELSON :

We're out of time! There were so many wonderful questions and comments that I didn't get a chance to answer. So please come back next week and ask again.

I hope you all enjoyed our discussion about the joys and hardships of military life. I know I did!

– June 22, 2011 1:02 PM