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Help For Troubled GI Kids Hard To Deliver

BY **Peggy McCarthy** | JUN 26, 2011 9:00 PM

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When Joseph Gambardella was in the second grade, he vomited every morning for three months. He missed a lot of school and saw a psychiatrist to deal with his emotional outbursts. He ended up repeating the second grade.

Last year, in eighth grade, he wrote in an essay: "There's still a little black dot in my heart. Something is still missing," related his mother, Christine Gambardella, of East Haven. "I think he was trying to say the word 'trauma,'" she said.

Joseph's emotional issues were prompted by his father's deployment to Qatar, his mother said. His father, Anthony, is in the Air Force Reserves. Since Qatar, Anthony's deployments have been in the U.S., ranging from three to six months—all tough on the family, Christine said.

In Connecticut, there are more than 10,000 children of active-duty military or National Guard and Reserves parents, many of whom have served repeated deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan. Programs and services for these children have been increasing in Connecticut, but advocates say there are still unmet needs.

Operation: Military Kids in Connecticut has provided services to some 5,000 children in the last two years, said Lisa Marcinkowski, program coordinator for the U.S. Defense Department program in this state. She said that there are military families living in every town in Connecticut. The state-run Military Support Program, which provides free, confidential counseling to members of the National Guard, Reserves and their families, served 40 children under 17 last year, and 103 children since it began in 2007. The law which established the program doesn't include active duty military and their families in the state, who sometimes call the program for help.

"It breaks our hearts when we get calls from a family member or a soldier who needs services and we need to turn them away," said Jim Tackett, director of veterans' services for the state Dept. of Mental Health and Addiction Services which runs the program.

Children whose parents are deployed have more problems than other kids, according to two studies in "Pediatrics." A December 2010 report concluded that nationwide, children between the ages of three and eight whose parents were deployed showed an 11 percent increase in outpatient visits for mental health and behavioral health issues. A 2009 study, showed that 11 to 17 year olds whose parents were deployed had more emotional problems than other children.

In Connecticut, it can be hard to find military children, particularly those like the Gambardellas, who have a parent in the Reserves or National Guard and aren't living on a base. Many families don't let

schools or their neighbors know they are connected to the military, so they miss out on help.

Educating Professionals, E-mailing Parents

Marcinkowski, an Army brat herself, lived in eight states by the time she graduated from high school. She speaks on behalf of Operation: Military Kids to professionals who work with children, to let them know that a child's problems may result from having a deployed parent. She

has a list of indicators at different age levels: an infant might become clingy and cry a lot; a five-year-old might not want to play with other kids; adolescents might indulge in dangerous behaviors like drug or alcohol use, or have self esteem issues.

Among teachers she has trained are those at the Coast Guard Academy Child Development Center in New London, including Brianna Pavlak who said of kids with deployed parents: "When I have five extra minutes, I make it a point to read a story to that child or give an extra hug. It's not something I can really fix, but I try to provide a little comfort for them."

A significant problem, these professionals say, is that teachers often don't know that they have military kids in their classes, particularly with them scattered throughout the state. It falls on parents to let them know and many don't. They may want to protect their privacy or not want their kids to be singled out as different. However, advocates for military kids expressed belief that the benefits of sharing this information are worth it in terms of the help and understanding teachers can give when they are aware of a parent's deployment.

Beth Darius, educational services facilitator at the Navy Sub Base in Groton, conducts group sessions for children before their fathers leave on a submarine and prior to their return home. She also refers children to social workers and psychologists, if needed. She said, depending on their ages, their worries can include not only missing their father, but if he will be able to breathe in a submarine, if he will be in danger, and changing family roles.

Contact with deployed parents is encouraged by therapists. Operation: Military Kids provides children with items including DVDs to record messages for their absent parents, and note cards for letter writing. The Coast Guard Child Development Center sends school reports and journals to deployed parents. At the Charles Barnum School in Groton, where there is a Deployment Club for military kids, psychologists suggested that kids put notes in a box in their parents' luggage to surprise them when they arrive at their assignments.

But, children whose fathers are in submarines have limited communication because of the nature of submarine duty, explained Darius. They can't receive e-mails while the sub is under water. So, it can be months before a parent can receive and respond to an e-mail from his child.

New Programs, Outreach Plans

For the first time, Operation: Military Kids will run a free, one-week camp in July for children of any military parents, whether active duty soldiers or members of the National Guard or Reserves. The camp will provide counseling services. All 100 spots were taken three weeks after the camp was publicized. Now, there's a wait list.

The National Guard runs family programs in Connecticut, but a spokesman didn't respond to repeated requests for interviews.

The Deployment Club started in April at the Charles Barnum School in Groton, where 90 percent of the students are military kids. "We thought maybe a couple of kids would be interested," said Valerie Nelson, principal. More than 50 children signed up. Membership was initially opened to first through fifth graders, but kindergarten parents asked that their children be included, too. The club, initiated by the Navy Submarine base as a pilot, is run by psychologists from the school and the Navy base for children who have a deployable parent.

The school is also an example of a military kids' success story. Despite its transient student body and children with deployed parents, its students' scores in the standardized Connecticut Mastery test in 2009-10 were exemplary—100 percentile in math and 91.7 percent in reading.

Meanwhile, there's a plan to give Connecticut military families more help, but it's not clear what form it will take. Military families will be the focus this fall of a major meeting called: Public Engagement Congress. Some 300 people, who are leaders in areas including politics, education, business, health care, and the media, will be invited to participate and develop a plan to enhance support for Connecticut military families, said Kathleen P. O'Beirne, of Groton, a board member of the Military Child Education Coalition. The national coalition is under contract with the U.S. Dept. of Defense to run these sessions in every state. Connecticut's "movers and shakers" who attend, O'Beirne said, will develop "concrete ideas" in a day and a half. "A great deal of awareness will be raised across the state," she said.

Marcinkowski says that military parents are grateful for programs. She gets e-mails and notes

from parents. One mother recently sent her a handmade card to thank her for the upcoming summer camp. "It means a lot to the military families," she said.

Tags: [military families](#), [mental health needs](#)

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