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**Military and Veteran Family Needs Assessment and Literature Review:
Considerations for Arts Providers and Creative Arts Therapists**
Summary Report: Children of Service Members and Veterans

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CHILDREN OF SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS

Children of service members—defined as dependents of service members—often experience uncertainty and change with very little control over their surroundings or physical location, especially children of active-duty service members who move often. According to the Department of Defense, roughly 1.7 million military children lived in the United States in 2018.

While they are typically seen as resilient and strong, children of service members and veterans also face unique challenges that can impact their mental and physical health. This report explores the challenges and strengths of military children as well as how arts programs can respond.

NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Transitions

There are many transitions throughout military service, including relocations and frequent moves (sometimes overseas), adjusting to new schools and communities, family reintegration, and transitioning to civilian life after military service. Many military children adapt to the lifestyle well but navigating new schools and resources along with financial difficulties and a variety of additional stressors can be a challenge. Studies have found negative impacts from military-related mobility such as mental health issues like anger, poor adjustment, anxiety, and behavioral problems (Cramm et al. 2019). These issues can be compounded by other factors of military life. Family members returning home after deployment and the changing family dynamics that result can be particularly difficult for children (Siegel and Davis 2013).

Separations

Most military children have been separated from their service member parent at some point. While this does not always result in behavioral or emotional challenges, it serves as a significant stressor that can sometimes be perceived as a loss by children (Siegel and Davis 2013). This is true of both deployment separations as well as other military-related separations, such as training. Research into preschool aged military children has indicated an increased need for mental health services during separation. Behavior issues such as disturbed sleep, increased crying, attachment issues, and toileting problems such as wetting the bed and other accidents (Cramm et al. 2019) are also common.

STRENGTHS AND RESILIENCE

Research has found many military children to be kind and mature with exceptional adaptability and openness, all of which are strengths that may help them rebound from stressors. Quality interaction with their communities, including developing relationships at school, is another factor that is sometimes linked to improved adjustment and functioning in the population (Huebner 2019).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ARTS PROVIDERS

Military children sometimes feel “invisible” while at school or in community care. Improving their sense of connection can help them to draw strength from the community through social support, friendships, and resources set aside for service members’ children (Rossiter et al. 2016). However, these benefits are not always extended to children of Reserve and National Guard members (Kudler and Porter 2013). Still, most military children adjust well to the experiences and challenges of the military lifestyle.

The arts can allow military children, including children of veterans, to discover and use their voice as well as serve as a tool to make friends or express emotions. When focused on strength building, arts programs can also help children improve resiliency (Collie et al. 2006).

Designing arts programs for military children that focus on their strengths, experiences, and challenges can maximize the benefits that military children gain from them. Other suggestions include:

- Creating a family-based approach that includes community members to increase familial and community ties.
- Providing flexibility and choice for children that is developmentally, or age, appropriate.
- Activities that reinforce their unique strengths while allowing them to interact with the broader community.
- Incorporating a group or team element to strengthen peer relationships.

To effectively interact with military children, community arts providers should build organizational skills in the following areas:

- Using evidence-based practices and evaluating programs.
- Increasing understanding of military culture.
- Collaborating with existing veteran or military serving organizations, and other community-based organizations.
- Conduct continuous outreach to military-connected participants and family members.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CREATIVE ARTS THERAPISTS

When working with children of service members and veterans, Creative Arts Therapists should consider:

- Offering a holistic approach in serving the whole family. In addition to serving the children of service members and veterans, include parents, grandparents, siblings, and other family members in activities, services, or events. Creative arts therapists should consider treating the family as a system in order to address and enhance parenting skills, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, family dynamics, and other variables within the family context.
- Using a strengths-based approach. Programs that focus on building or enhancing skills, strengths, and relationships are often more engaging and more beneficial.

- Using a multidisciplinary approach. Multiple treatment options and providers address varying needs (e.g., physical health, mental health, and community engagement) and promote collaboration and coordination among service providers.
- Using developmentally appropriate practice. The needs and experiences of military children vary widely, and programs should take a developmental and contextual approach to caring for military-connected children and youth.

RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of 12 weeks, a research team collated a data and literature review about experiences of service members, veterans, caregivers, and families. They then collected peer-reviewed content to identify important names, concepts, and connections across disciplines. Finally, a selection matrix of key individuals and organizations was created to help identify 19 subject matter experts who were surveyed about their insights regarding support methods, programs, and effective service.

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