

MHS Profiles

MILITARY HEALTH SYSTEM

Saluting America's **SMALLEST HEROES**

by Jessica L. Klem



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Little hug, big support:

Army Cpt. Mike Ford hugs goodbye to daughter Hannah on the day he left for deployment. Hannah, showing support for her father, is dressed in red, white and blue and carries an American flag. Photo by Mistie Ford.



// Trinity tells kids: ‘My dad’s job is to help people.’ Since she’s only three, I can’t explain specifics, but she understands the importance of his job. //

Trinity Deprez has attended three Tumblebears classes and, so far, has mastered a somersault. Thanks to a grant made possible by the nonprofit Our Military Kids, Trinity has a paid enrollment in a gymnastics class and the chance to master more tumbles and turns.

“She knows what has made this possible,” says Trinity’s mother, Amy Deprez. “She tells kids: ‘My dad’s job is to help people.’ Since she’s only three, I can’t really explain to her the specifics, but she understands the importance of his job,” she says of her husband, Army National Guard Cpl. Christopher Deprez.

Our Military Kids awards grants to military children who have either a National Guard or Reserve parent deployed overseas, or who have a parent who has been severely injured. Children receive grants of up to \$500 to cover six months of sports, fine arts or academic programs.

“Kids can sign up for just about anything,” says Our Military Kids special programs director, Mary Carolyn Voght. “We even had a family in Oklahoma who used the money to buy livestock for the kids to use in a 4-H project.”

According to the Department of Defense, of the more than 2 million children in the U.S. with a parent in the military, 11 percent have a parent who is currently deployed, leaving many families with the challenge of raising children in a single-parent household. Our Military Kids is one of many organizations providing opportunities for these families. Whether an organization is developing an initiative on its own or working in tandem with others, the same goal remains: protect the well-being of the military child.

DoD Partners for Kids

The Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy) leads Department of Defense efforts in military family and children’s services. MC&FP is directly responsible for providing family support policies and programs, creating education policy, and establishing programs for Morale, Welfare and Recreation. To do this, it partners and coordinates with non-governmental organizations like the American Red Cross, Armed Services YMCA, and the United Service Organizations to





provide unique opportunities for families with unique needs.

“We are dedicated to creating strong, viable partnerships with a variety of non-governmental organizations. Our partnerships with these organizations and other federal agencies help us meet the needs of military kids,” says Barbara Thompson, director of the Office of Family Policy/Children and Youth for MC&FP.

A partnership with the Armed Services YMCA provides free family memberships, respite care and activities for children of the Reserve and Guard. “For the geographically isolated, this provides them a time for themselves – a positive experience they might not otherwise be able to have,” says Thompson.

Frank Gallo, national executive director of ASYMCA, agrees that providing families with support and diversions can ease stress during challenging times. “We provide child care specifically for when mom is visiting dad at a military treatment facility. Giving them that break can make such a difference,” he says.

MC&FP also partners with Sesame Workshop’s “Talk, Listen, Connect,” or TLC, program. Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit organization behind TV’s “Sesame Street,” and the TLC initiative offers two DVDs that cover the psychological effects that a parent’s military deployment can have on a child. A third installment of TLC will be released April 13 and aims to help children cope with

// Our partnerships with non-government organizations help us meet the needs of military kids. //



the loss of a military parent and improve a child's understanding of the "spectrum of grief" that is often experienced with the loss of a loved one.

"The TLC videos are very powerful materials that allow the parent to help their children understand these very stressful situations that have occurred in their lives," says Thompson. "They are available in English and Spanish, and we have gotten the best response that these materials have made such a difference in the lives of our military children."

In creating products for the TLC program, Sesame Workshop and MC&FP also partnered with the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, which helped attract some star power to the series.

"Our collaboration with DCoE resulted in a PBS-hosted special on TLC Two with Queen Latifah and John Mayer, highlighting service members returning with injuries – some physical and others with [traumatic brain injury] and [post-traumatic stress disorder]," says Thompson.

All smiles: Army National Guard Cpl. Christopher Deprez smiles with daughter Trinity, 3. At the time of publication, Deprez had left for deployment. Photo by Amy Deprez.

Talk, Listen, Connect: Service members and their children gather with "Sesame Street" characters at a USO event to promote the "Talk, Listen, Connect" series of DVDs, which help small children understand the effects of deployment. Photo by Fred Greaves.





Sesame Workshop has also engaged the USO to help produce a traveling tour of military installations where children can experience the TLC program. “It gives [children] an avenue to understand what’s going on and how to talk about mom or dad deploying, but in an entertaining way,” said Steven Missimer, vice president of programs for the USO.

Connecting with children in yet another way, the USO now works with California-based nonprofit United Through Reading, which videotapes deployed parents reading books to their children so that a child can watch the DVDs and read along while his or her parent is away.

“Reading is simple, but has a profound effect,” says Dr. Sally Ann Zoll, chief executive officer of United Through Reading. “In

Family Affair: Army Maj. Matthew McAlister reads a Sesame Street book with his daughter Chloe, 5, before the start of the USO/Sesame Street Experience for military families at U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan in South Korea, Feb. 10, 2010. Photo by Fred Greaves.

// Often, communities salute the soldier and give thanks—and rightly so—but just because the family doesn’t wear the uniform doesn’t mean they don’t struggle. They serve, too. //

one e-mail, we heard from a mom whose husband was deployed who said that her 2-year-old went wild, dancing around every time the video of her dad reading was played. She would run around, wiggling her bottom at the TV. It took her mom awhile to realize the little girl was trying to sit on dad's lap while he read to her."

Early Intervention

While some of the programs made possible through MC&FP and NGO partnerships support families and children in a broad sense, they are also working to identify and provide care for children and families that need help coping with the psychological stress of the challenges of deployment and loss.

MC&FP offers nonmedical counseling through Military OneSource and the MC&FP Military Family Life Consultant Program. "Licensed clinicians are available and provide more of a problem-solving opportunity," says Thompson, who adds that MC&FP also embeds behavioral specialists in schools that have a large population of military kids.

"We train the staff, teachers—anyone who interacts with military kids—to have information on what they are going through. This is a wonderful way to ameliorate the need for escalated mental health care. If a clinician sees a need for higher intervention, then he or she can refer them. We look at it as total prevention, trying to work the problem at the lowest level before it escalates to something more robust."

Study Indicates Support of Child's Caregiver Paramount

A recent study conducted by the RAND Corporation and commissioned by the National Military Family Association highlighted the effects of military life on children. The study, "Children on the Homefront: The Experience of Children From Military Families," found that children's behavioral and emotional problems decrease as the stress of the caregiver decreases. "While having a parent deployed undoubtedly brings stress, the study found that the children who coped better were in homes where the caregiver was healthy and had a positive attitude," says Michelle Joyner, communications director for the National Military Family Association. Approximately 1,500 children from all services and components participated in the study; 85 percent of them also attended the NMFA Operation Purple summer camps. "We are releasing an update in spring 2010 on the children's progress made throughout this year. We are excited to see the continued results and work toward providing the whole military family with support."

Courage to Care Courage to Talk Campaign

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, part of Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and a partnering center of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, is launching the Courage to Care Courage to Talk campaign in April. The first of its kind, this hospital-based campaign seeks to facilitate communication around the impact of war injuries on military families and children, and to connect families to resources and individuals within the hospital who can answer their questions, talk with them about their children or address other family concerns related to injury.

Courage to Care Courage to Talk acknowledges the important role that families play in the injury recovery process. Through its educational resources (posters, brochures and fact sheets) and a dedicated Web site, www.couragetotalk.org, the campaign enhances family resilience, sustained parenting and appropriate communication about injury with children of all ages to ensure healthy development.

The Military Pathways program, a DoD initiative administered through the Office of Force Health Protection and Readiness, also promotes mental health within the military family. The Brief Screening for Adolescent Depression is available on its Web site, www.militarymentalhealth.org, and helps parents determine if their children are showing signs of depression or suicidal behavior. Military Pathways also provides

the Signs of Suicide (SOS) program to empower peers and teachers to “ACT”—acknowledge, care and tell—to help save a child who is suicidal. This program has been distributed to more than 500 Department of Defense Education Activity and military-impacted schools.

MC&FP and Military Pathways both acknowledge that children can feel psychological stress

from having a deployed or injured parent, and the parent left at home to care for children also may struggle. Not only is the parent at home faced with running a single-parent household, but also with ensuring the psychological health of his or her children.

“If a parent is struggling, that greatly impacts the children,” says Katherine Cruise, director of communications and marketing for



Military Pathways. “Studies have shown this for a long time: If mom or dad is depressed, the children are at greater risk for developing depression, substance abuse problems, and antisocial behavior.”

“For years we have focused on the service member who comes back with post-traumatic stress disorder or depression—and we should,” says Cruise. “But since the family struggles, too, we are working hard to provide support for them.”

For the caregivers at home during longer and more frequent deployments, Thompson notes the importance of Family Readiness Groups. These organizations of family members, volunteers, service members and civilian employees associated with a particular unit are sponsored by commands or installations.

“FRGs act as an avenue of mutual support and assistance, and as a network of communication among family members, the chain of command, chain of concern and community resources,” says Thompson. “We are working steadfastly to outreach to more moms, to ensure they come to

the FRG meetings, get out of the house and talk through their problems. This is why we provide respite care.”

In fact, sometimes diversions for both mom and child can ease stress. While mom can escape to an FRG meeting, for kids there are opportunities like the National Military Family Association’s Operation Purple summer camps. These camps are free and allow kids to build friendships and



Camp days: Two girls participate in an Operation Purple camp for military kids. The camps are sponsored by the National Military Family Association and take place in a National State Park. Photo courtesy of the National Military Family Association.

Good Grief: Children and their mentors at the TAPS Good Grief camp release balloons with notes in honor of their lost loved ones. Good Grief camps allow kids to engage in age-appropriate activities to grieve their fallen loved ones. Photo courtesy of TAPS.

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Resources for Military Children and Families

THE OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR MILITARY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY POLICY provides programs to establish and support community quality of life for service members and their families worldwide: prhome.defense.gov/mcftp.html

ARMED SERVICES YMCA provides support services to military members and their families, including child care, hospital assistance and spousal support services: www.asymca.org

THE MILITARY PATHWAYS program provides tools to understand some of the more common mental health issues for the whole family: www.militarymentalhealth.org

NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION provides a myriad of programs for the military family, including camps for kids and spousal scholarships: www.militaryfamily.org

OUR MILITARY KIDS provides a grant program for children of the National Guard or Reserve to pay for children's activities in fine arts, education and sports: www.ourmilitarykids.org

THANKSUSA offers funds for a military family scholarship program: www.thanksusa.org

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS) is the 24/7 tragedy assistance resource for anyone who has suffered the loss of a military loved one: www.taps.org

UNITED SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS deliver its special brand of comfort, morale and recreational services to the military family: www.uso.org

UNITED THROUGH READING connects families facing physical separation by facilitating the bonding experience of reading aloud together: www.unitedthroughreading.org

camaraderie with each other and talk to camp counselors about stress and sadness.

Since the camp's inception in 2004, more than 30,000 military children have taken part in an Operation Purple summer camp. "Kids serve too," says Michelle Joyner, communications director for the National Military Family Association. "Often, communities salute the soldier and give thanks—and rightly so—but just because the family doesn't wear the uniform doesn't mean they don't struggle. They serve, too."

Sometimes a child's service results in the ultimate sacrifice, loss of a parent.

Coping With Loss

For those military kids who have lost a service member parent, there are groups like the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS hosts an annual four-day event over Memorial Day weekend called Good Grief Camp for Young Survivors, where 350 children of the fallen gather in Washington, D.C., and are paired one-on-one with mentors. These mentors are service members trained in how to companion a child who is grieving. The organization also partners with military installations around the country and conducts about 20 regional Good Grief camps per year.

"Good Grief Camp increases the community of care around children and provides them with the resources to build resiliency—how to deal with the loss by



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knowing they are not alone,” says Ami Neiberger-Miller, public affairs director for TAPS and a military survivor herself.

Bereavement experts say that children can grieve throughout their lifetimes and particularly when they reach key milestones. The TAPS program empowers children with coping skills. “They deal with their loss in age-appropriate activities. Six-year-olds pound Play-Doh, while older kids make collages out of magazines. They all release balloons with a note up to the person they love who died. At the end of the day, kids are kids; they will still laugh and run around and play, despite their loss. We have to give them permission to still be children,” says Neiberger-Miller.

Taylor Curry, the son of a retired technical sergeant in the Air Force, knows what it’s like to lose a parent. Curry’s father spent 23 years in the Air Force and fought in both the Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom before retiring in 2003. Shortly after returning home, his father was diagnosed with PTSD and took his own life in 2008.



Above: Navy Master at Arms Chief Petty Officer Martin Dudley participates in a United Through Reading recording session. Photo courtesy of United Through Reading.



Left: The son of Navy Seaman Ryan Honnoll, excitedly watches the United Through Reading DVD of his father reading to him. Photo courtesy of United Through Reading.



Now a junior at the Savannah College of Art and Design majoring in photography, Curry received a \$3,000 scholarship through ThanksUSA, an organization offering scholarships to both children and spouses of the

military. "In the past four years, we have provided nearly 2,000 people with scholarships, valued at approximately \$6 million," says Michele Stork, executive director for ThanksUSA.

"My mom and I were just searching for ways to help pay for college, and we came across ThanksUSA," says Curry. "I know there are more organizations like that out there, and I'm still doing research to see if there are any other



Dear our MILITary
Kids,
Thank you for the
grant. It helps us
because our dad is gone,
and we couldn't do Taekw-
on do without it. We
really like Taekwon Do.
Your support is very
special. From David and Jack
Bashaw

Appreciation: Thank-you note and a photo from children who received grants from Our Military Kids. OMK provides sports, academic or fine arts activities to help alleviate a child's stress during their parent's deployment. Photo courtesy of Our Military Kids.

Giving back: Taylor Curry used a ThanksUSA scholarship to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design where he is majoring in photography. Curry is scheduled to graduate in 2012, after which he will either enter the Peace Corps or attend graduate studies abroad. Photo by Taylor Curry.

helpful organizations for college scholarships. ThanksUSA and its donors show their appreciation for the sacrifices made by not only the troops but entire military families as well.”

Achieving More Together

The Office of Military Family and Community Policy recognizes that its efforts in supporting the military child and family are made possible through partnerships with NGOs.

“We need others’ expertise to create the best programs and partnerships – like what we received through the Sesame Workshop – in order to really leverage the right programs at the right time for the right people,” says Thompson.

“Our shared goal is to keep everyone safe and supported,” says Thompson. “The more families know about this very holistic approach to their well-being, the more we can help.”

While this support is enabling 21-year-old Curry to embark on his photography career, children like 3-year-old Trinity Deprez have only begun to realize what being in a military family means. In early March, Trinity’s dad deployed.

“We are all so proud of him,” says Amy Deprez. “I know the military, through its partnerships, has so many opportunities to support Trinity while my husband is away. It won’t be easy without him here, but for now, I just want her to be a kid and learn her cartwheels... something to show daddy when he gets back.” ■



Family support leadership:

Barbara Thompson, director of the Department of Defense Office of Family Policy/Children and Youth for Military Community and Family

Policy, and Betsy Graham, program analyst for MC&FP, stand in Big Bird’s nest at a MC&FP and Sesame Workshop event. Photo courtesy of Sesame Workshop.

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