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Navigating Early Parenthood and Military Life

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Navigating Early Parenthood and Military Life



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Today's Presenters



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Acknowledgement



Our mission is to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life.

We envision a society that has the knowledge and will to support all infants and toddlers in reaching their full potential.

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Learning Objectives

- Recognize the challenges and strengths that military partners/spouses face as it relates to parenting
- Describe strategies to identify clients service providers are working with, including recognizing the importance of understanding military service/culture and the impact it has on the family unit
- Identify effective communication and community resources for maintaining the mental health and well-being of military-connected parents

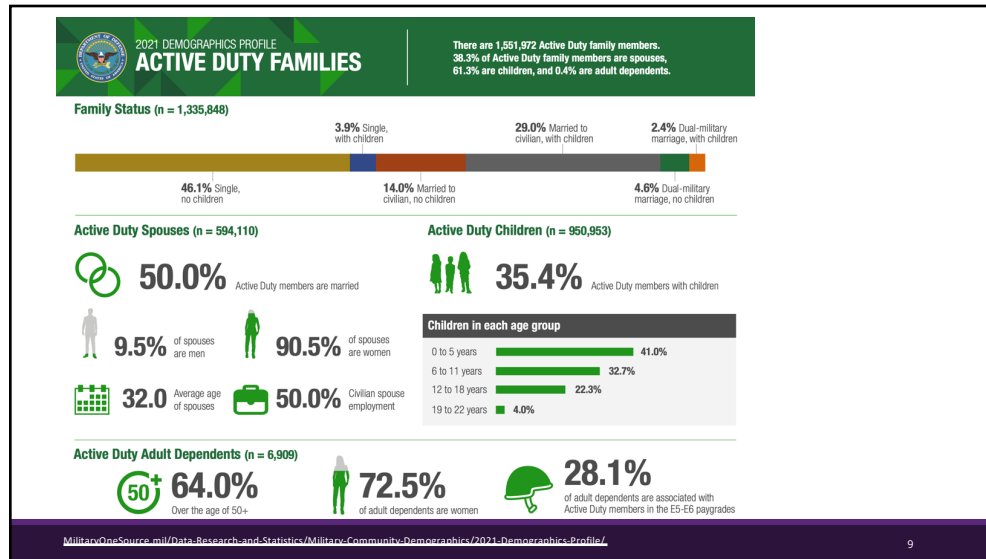
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Who Are Military- Connected Children?

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(Huebner, 2019)

Why Should You Care?

Up to 50% of military connected children are seen in civilian medical clinics for their care.

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A Look Into Military Life

Jolene and Michael, a married couple with a two year old and a two week old, have just arrived at your installation after a cross-country Permanent Change of Station (PCS). The family has no local supports nearby, and this is Michael's first non-training assignment since he is relatively early in his military career.

Upon their arrival, Michael is required to leave for a three week training on the other side of the state where he will not be permitted phone contact with others. Jolene is in housing, but only has the items that they were able to travel with in their car as their Household Goods Shipment (HHG) shipment was delayed by 30 days. Jolene reports feeling exhausted, stressed, and lonely since their arrival and unsure of how to connect with others and make new friends.

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Jolene and Michael: A Common Story

Based on what you know about the experiences of military families, what are some of the unique stressors that Jolene may experience in the new location?

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Jolene and Michael: A Common Story


What impacts on Jolene's functioning and well-being are you concerned with?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod! Please select  "Everyone" in the drop-down menu when commenting.

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Jolene and Michael: A Common Story

What would be your immediate next step if you were working with Jolene?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod! 

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(Huebner, 2019)

The Connection Between Parent and Child

- Family functioning has been shown to predict returned service member's PTSD symptoms (Evans, Cowlishaw, Forbes, Parslow, & Lewis, 2010).
- Child behavior problems can predict parent stress, which in turn can predict child behavior problems.
- Caregiver strain can lead to, or worsen, parent mental health issues.

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Section Summary

- Military families are a significant portion of the population, and are not always "visible," especially when seeking services from civilian providers
- Many military families also have very young children (age 0 – 3)
- The military lifestyle, which is frequently filled with uncertainty and changing plans, is also marked by frequent absences from the military service member, PCS moves, and other lifestyle changes that place considerable stress on all members of the family
- For military families with children, the "at home" parent is frequently left to make things work during these absences or changes

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Impacts of Military Stressors on Young Children and Caregivers

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(Slade et al, 2014)

A Secure Base

Given What We Know About Babies

(Parfalian and Seibel 2002)

- The first 3 years are a critical period of extraordinary growth
- Development is continuous
- Physical, cognitive, language and social/emotional development are “inextricably linked”
- Babies learn in the context of **relationships**

We Hope that Parents Provide

(ZERO TO THREE, 2014)

- Predictability
- Emotional attunement
- Sensitivity
- Contingent responsiveness
- Co-regulation
- Mutuality

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(Slade et al, 2014)

Babies and Toddlers are Tuned In!

Babies can sense and be affected by their parents' moods from birth.

Many parents don't realize babies are capable of feeling a wide range of emotions, including sadness and fear.

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(Slade et al, 2014)

Signs a Toddler May Be Experiencing Stress

- Hyperarousal
- Withdrawn or avoidant behavior
- Aggressive behavior
- Regression, or falling behind in development
- Changes in eating or sleep patterns
- In play, acts out scary event

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(Slade et al, 2014)

Attachment Mitigates Child Stress

Co-regulation

Predictability

Emotional attunement

Sensitivity

Contingent responsiveness

Mutuality

Physical touch – being held, cuddled, hugged, carried, holding hands, sitting on parent’s lap

Eye contact

Language – talking, listening and responding to baby

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Photo by Anna Shvets from [iStock](#)



“We have found that **‘relational health’** is as important a predictor of outcomes as adversity. Humans are relational creatures and if we have healthy supportive **connections**, this literally buffers our stress responses in ways that are protective and therapeutic. Health is all about **connectedness** – health in all domains.” – Bruce Perry

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Discussion Question

Given what we know about the strengths and challenges of the military lifestyle, and what we've learned about what young children need to thrive and build healthy attachment, in what ways do you think the military lifestyle both supports healthy attachments between caregivers and children and potentially hinders these attachments?

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What To Do

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(Huebner, 2019)

Ways to Support Military-Connected Parents

- Inquiring about military status/military family involvement
- Providing accurate information on child developmental milestones
- Modeling “I wonder...” statements about children
- Noticing the meaning behind a child’s behavior with the parent
- Engaging in non-judgmental observation of children in the home visit
- Taking on the child’s perspective and expressing that to a parent
- Helping parents to gain awareness of their own emotional state
- Supporting and celebrating contingent responses in parents

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Role of Reflective Functioning

Reflective functioning refers to the parent’s ability to engage in mentalization - the capacity to identify, hold, and interpret mental states, such as intentions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs, of both self and others, as well as to make meaning of these mental states in relation to intra—and interpersonal behaviors and interactions.

In other terms, this is the parent’s ability to notice a behavior exhibited by their child and to look for the meaning behind the behavior before responding to it.

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(Falkenström et al., 2014)

Role of Reflective Functioning cont.

Benefits of reflective functioning include:

- Shows that we care about the babies' thoughts and feelings
- Sends the message to babies that they are heard and understood
- Reduces frustration for both babies and parents
- Helps parents respond contingently
- Increases parents' sense of efficacy (parent self-efficacy)

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Reflective Functioning in Practice

Let's review two statements shared by different military family members about a similar child need:

"My daughter is always so clingy at drop off! She knows there's nothing to be scared of, and I know she has fun after I leave. So why does she have to make it so difficult for me when I have to go to work? I end up feeling guilty and stressed out all day!"

"I know my son gets a little worried when it's time for drop off at daycare. I think he understands that it means we will be away from each other for a little while, and he needs extra time to cuddle and interact before I can leave. He still gets upset, but I try to reassure him that I will be back soon."

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Reflective Functioning Requires Parents...

- To maintain curiosity about what their child is thinking and feeling
- To engage in perspective-taking
- To know the basics of infant and early childhood development
- To slow down and take a step back
- To observe non-judgmentally about their child
- To reflect on their own emotional state
- To respond to their child contingently and flexibly

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

What Gets in the Way of Reflective Functioning?

- Everyday misattunement or assumptions about behavior
- Everyday and chronic stress
- Stressors related to military service or military family status
- Expectations for child outside what they are capable of
- Personal history or experiences (especially as children themselves)

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Misattunement/Assumptions

- For successful attunement, **parents need only be “attuned” for 30%** of the time they are interacting with their child.
- When caregivers are not attuned, but return to attunement, this action is considered “repair” and promotes attachment building.
- Some parents may make assumptions about their children’s behaviors and engage in “taking behaviors personally.”
 - I.e. “I don’t why she always tantrums when we get back home after a long day – she knows how tired I am! Why is she doing this to me?”

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Everyday and Chronic Stress

Everyday stressors, such as needing to complete an unexpected errand or running late for childcare drop off, pulls parents away from their ability to be attuned as they navigate where they need to place their attention to cope with everyday stress. This is normal and is mitigated through repair.

Chronic stress causes higher risk for parents and family well-being as this affords fewer opportunities for repair and may cause the families to fall into dysfunctional patterns of behavior that further increase stress for both parents and children.

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Stressors Related to Military Service

Similarly, stressors related to military service can also be the source of everyday and chronic stress. Common stressors include:

- PCS moves
- Deployment
- Temporary duty travel (TDY) requirements
- Changing/demanding work schedules
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of available/affordable housing
- Lack of available/affordable child care
- Distance from friends and family

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Misaligned Expectations for Child Capacity

Many parents struggle with an understanding of child developmental milestones, especially social-emotional developmental milestones.

When parents hold expectations for their children outside of their developmental capacity, parents and children can become frustrated and act out of their frustration.



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Discussion Question

At what age do children begin to understand the concept of “no” or that something is forbidden?

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Discussion Question

At what age are children capable of resisting doing something that they are not permitted to do?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod!

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(Falkenström et al, 2014)

Personal History and Experiences

- Parents are also individuals with their own unique histories, experiences, beliefs, and values.
- When parents have experiences that have been traumatic, they may struggle with being attuned and building attachment with their children.
- Parents with histories of childhood trauma may further struggle when attempting to engage with their young children through play and other attachment behaviors - they may feel unfocused, unable to keep attuned attention, or find these activities frustrating or feel unsure about their role.

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(Butler, L. A., & Randall, D., 2013).

Parental Coregulation

- Parental coregulation is the process by which parents and their children regulate each other's emotions, behaviors, and physiology. It is a dynamic and reciprocal process that involves both parents and children adjusting their behavior in response to each other.
- Parental coregulation begins in infancy, when parents help their babies to regulate their emotions and behaviors. For example, a parent might soothe a crying baby by picking them up, rocking them, and singing to them. Parental coregulation requires parents to also be aware of their own sense feelings, energy, and reactivity, and to take steps to self-soothe and calm in order to soothe and calm their young children.

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(Falkenström et al., 2014)

Supporting Parental Coregulation & Self-Care

- Validate how a parent is feeling
- Help parents “talk out” the thoughts and judgments they have
- Help parents understand the value of engaging in self-calming exercises (not just during times of stress!)
- Encourage additional supportive services, if warranted

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Building Parental Capacity: The Protective Factors Framework

Parental Resilience
 Understanding Parenting and Child Development
 Concrete Support in Times of Need
 Social Connections
 Social-Emotional Competence of Young Children

Providers can structure work with families by identifying these with families, noticing strengths and areas of concerns, and working to build the protective factors through referrals and interventions.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Parental Resilience

Refers to a parent's ability to effectively navigate and adapt to challenges, stressors, and adversity while maintaining a positive and nurturing environment for their children.

This concept recognizes that parents may face various difficulties, such as economic hardships, family crises, or personal stressors, but their capacity to cope with these challenges can greatly impact their parenting abilities and their children's overall well-being.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Supporting Parental Resilience

To support this protective factor, providers can engage in:

Strengthening Coping Skills: Supportive professionals can provide parents with coping strategies and stress management techniques to better handle challenging situations.

Promoting Social Connections: Professionals can help parents establish and maintain strong social networks.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Supporting Parental Resilience cont.

Offering Education and Information: Providing parents with accurate information about child development, parenting techniques, and available resources can enhance their confidence and competence as caregivers.

Encouraging Self-Care: Professionals can emphasize the importance of self-care for parents.

Strength-Based Approach: Adopting a strength-based approach, professionals can help parents identify and utilize their existing strengths and resources.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Understanding Parenting and Child Development

Refers to the knowledge and awareness that parents have about child development, effective parenting practices, and age-appropriate expectations for their children.

This protective factor recognizes that parents who have a good understanding of these aspects are better equipped to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for their children's growth and well-being.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Understanding Parenting and Child Development cont.

To support this protective factor, providers can engage in:

Parenting Workshops and Education: Professionals can offer workshops and educational sessions that cover various aspects of child development, parenting techniques, and behavior management strategies.

Resource Sharing: Professionals can provide parents with recommended books, articles, websites, and other resources related to child development and effective parenting.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Understanding Parenting and Child Development cont.

Developmental Milestone Tracking: Encouraging parents to track their child's developmental milestones and offering guidance on what to expect at different stages can help parents feel more confident and informed about their child's growth.

Observation and Feedback: Professionals can offer opportunities for parents to interact with their children in controlled settings and provide constructive feedback.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Concrete Support in Time of Need

Refers to the availability of tangible resources and assistance that families can access during times of crisis or difficulty.

This protective factor recognizes that families are better able to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children when they have access to necessary support systems, such as financial assistance, housing, and other essential resources.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Concrete Support in Time of Need cont.

To support this protective factor, providers can engage in:

Resource Referrals: Professionals can connect parents with local community resources such as food banks, housing assistance programs, and childcare services.

Emergency Assistance: Professionals can help navigate emergency assistance programs and access temporary shelter, food, and financial aid.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Concrete Support in Time of Need cont.

Case Management: Supportive professionals can work closely with families to assess their needs and develop action plans to address challenges.

Advocacy: Professionals can advocate on behalf of families to ensure they receive fair treatment and access to necessary services.

Skill-Building: Professionals can offer workshops and training sessions that teach practical skills such as budgeting, job searching, and time management.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social Connections

Refers to the relationships and networks that families develop within their communities.

This protective factor recognizes the importance of having a supportive circle of friends, family members, neighbors, and other community members.

These connections provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, which can help families navigate challenges and enhance their well-being.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social Connections cont.

To support this protective factor, providers can engage in:

Community Engagement: Professionals can encourage parents to participate in community activities, events, and organizations.

Support Groups: Organizing or recommending support groups for parents can provide a space where they can share experiences, advice, and emotional support with others facing similar challenges.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social Connections cont.

Parenting Classes: Offering parenting classes or workshops creates opportunities for parents to connect with one another, share insights, and develop relationships while learning about effective parenting strategies.

Parent Cafés or Discussion Groups: Establishing informal discussion groups or "parent cafés" where parents can come together to discuss various topics related to parenting, share their stories, and offer mutual support can help build social connections.

Neighborhood Networks: Professionals can facilitate connections among parents living in the same neighborhood.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social-Emotional Competence of Young Children

Refers to a child's ability to understand, manage, and express their emotions in healthy and appropriate ways.

This protective factor emphasizes the importance of fostering emotional intelligence and social skills in young children, which contributes to their overall well-being, positive relationships, and success in various life domains.

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OneOp Series - Social-Emotional Learning



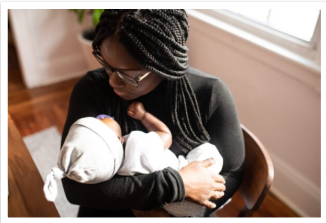
OneOp.org/Series/YouthResilience/ 

Military Youth: Protecting and Promoting Resilience and Well-Being

This webinar series shares insights on protecting and promoting military-connected youth's resilience and mental well-being.

- Provides evidence-informed strategies to promote resiliency and thriving in youth,
- Further your understanding of the value of social-emotional learning, and
- Identify specific ways adults can support youth well-being

OneOp Series - Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health



That's the Ticket: Exploring Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) refers to the development of secure relationships with adults and peers, the ability to manage and express a range of emotions, and explore their environment in the context of their family, community, and culture (Zero to Three, 2017). This webinar series defines IECMH and provides service providers with important knowledge, awareness, strategies, and tools to support the healthy socioemotional development of children ages birth to 5 years old.

OneOp.org/Series/Thats-the-Ticket-Exploring-Infant-and-Early-Childhood-Mental-Health/



(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social-Emotional Competence of Young Children

To support this protective factor, providers can engage in:

Parenting Workshops: Professionals can offer workshops that educate parents about child development, emotional regulation, and effective strategies for fostering healthy social-emotional development in young children.

Emotion Coaching: Supportive professionals can teach parents the principles of emotion coaching, which involves acknowledging and validating a child's emotions while helping them learn how to manage and express their feelings constructively.

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(Harper Browne, 2016)

Social-Emotional Competence of Young Children cont.

Modeling Social-Emotional Skills: Professionals can model positive social and emotional behaviors when interacting with both parents and children.

Guidance on Positive Discipline: Professionals can provide guidance on using positive discipline techniques that focus on teaching children appropriate behavior and problem-solving skills rather than punitive measures.

Parent-Child Playtime: Encouraging parents to engage in playtime with their children can help them develop strong emotional bonds and provide opportunities for parents to teach and model social and emotional skills through play.

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Helping a Military Parent: Vignette


Theresa and Doug have been married for 3 years. Doug is a corporal in the Army. They have a 2-year-old, Katie. Theresa was diagnosed with Postpartum depression (PPD) after Katie's birth. Theresa is expecting at 7 months. The family recently had a PCS from Fort Irwin, California to Fort Liberty, North Carolina.

Doug states that Katie has been "out of control" since they moved. Theresa shares she wants to be proactive in preventing problem behavior, and knows how to handle another bout of PPD. Doug says that he wants to be supportive but is concerned that he may frequently go on TDY with his new billet. Theresa says that the timing of the PCS was the worst for her pregnancy. She does not know anyone at the new duty station.

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 **Let's Discuss...**


What do you need to know to support this family?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod! Please select "Everyone" in the drop-down menu when commenting.

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 **Let's Discuss...**

What risk factors do you see?
How might you mitigate the risk factors?


What protective factors do you observe?
How might you leverage this family's protective factors and other strengths?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod!

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Let's Discuss...

What resources would be helpful for this family?

Share your thoughts in the chat-pod!

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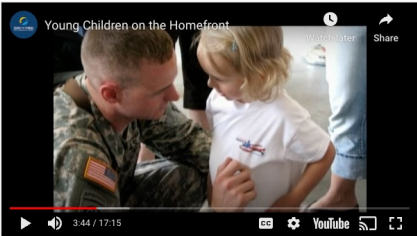
Resources

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Young Children on the Homefront



Military and Veteran Family Support

We work to increase awareness and collaboration throughout the military community for both parents and professionals.

The Military Family Projects Team at ZERO TO THREE works to develop resources and tools that support the health and development of infants, toddlers and their families.

Our work ranges from supporting young children in military-connected families through the creation of parent tools to developing professional development content for those who support military families around the world.

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Free App Available for Android and Apple Phones/Tablets

- Strategies for dealing with challenging behaviors
- Activities to promote parent-child connections
- Self-Care tips for parents
- Activities to support healthy growth and development

Learn more at BabiesOnTheHomefront.org




Whether you're home or away, we're making parenting just a little easier. Download our free **"Babies on the Homefront"** app for tips to help your babies grow big and strong.

babiesonthehomefront.org

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Parent Flyers



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Children's Books



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Questions? Closing Comments...

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This webinar has been approved for 1.5 continuing education (CE) credit hours from the following:

- The University of Texas at Austin, Steve Hicks School of Social Work
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