

How Building Strong, Healthy Relationships Can Support Military Kids

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Understanding the Experiences of Military Youth

Military youth have a unique set of experiences that shape their lives at school and beyond. They often move every few years as their parent(s) transfer bases, leaving behind familiar teachers, friends, and communities. Many also face the emotional challenges of having a parent deployed and live with the uncertainty of their safety while adapting to shifts in their social environments.

Experiences like these have a profound impact on their social, personal, and academic development: (1) new school environments and friends, (2) limited access to extracurricular activities, (3) lack of understanding of military culture by public school teachers and staff, (4) concerns about parental deployment, and (5) slow transfer of records and differences in curricula between schools (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Recent data shows:

- **Over 80%** of military-connected youth are in U.S. public schools.
- Military-connected youth **move 6 to 9 times** during their K–12 education.
- Military-connected youth move and change schools **3 times more often** than their civilian peers (Military Child Education Coalition, 2017).

Frequent relocations can make it difficult for military youth to build long-term friendships, feel a sense of belonging, or cope with parental deployment. This inconsistency can take a toll on a child's emotional well-being during their formative and adolescent years — when stable relationships play a critical role in developing resilience and a strong sense of self. As one military-affiliated student enrolled at National University observed, many children struggle not just with the logistics of moving, but with the emotional weight of losing familiar relationships and support systems.

Commonalities Between Military and Civilian Kids

Despite their different life circumstances, military and civilian kids share similar personal and social needs. Both groups crave friendship, understanding, and a sense of belonging. Whether it's navigating school stress, coping with uncertainty, or managing social pressures, these shared desires and emotions offer opportunities for connection and empathy.

Strategies for Strengthening Relationships Among Military and Civilian Kids

Helping military kids build strong relationships is key to making them feel safe, supported, and understood. Educators, school counselors, and other adults can start by meeting them where they are and connecting them to nearby resources and people.

One effective approach for strengthening relationships between military and civilian kids starts with intentional relationship-building routines and explicit skill-building to build critical relationship skills, like empathy, communication, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, and empathy (Yoder, 2022). Here are three effective strategies from the [Harmony Curriculum](#), from Harmony Academy, and from military-affiliated students enrolled at National University:

Encourage Active Listening and Open Communication

Teaching kids how to listen with understanding and ask thoughtful questions helps them build deeper, more meaningful relationships with one another. Adults, especially teachers and parents, play an important role in modeling this behavior. Start by creating a psychologically safe space where youth feel comfortable expressing their feelings. This means being fully present by putting down any distractions like phones, avoiding multitasking, and truly engaging with what youth are saying.

Tip: Use Harmony Academy's Quick Connection Cards for conversation starters and fun prompts.



Foster Welcoming Environments

Equally important is creating welcoming school environments where all students feel seen and included. Teachers can create these spaces for military youth by pairing military and civilian youth in group activities and encouraging peer-to-peer connection from the very beginning of the school year or whenever a new student joins the class.

A simple yet powerful exercise, recommended by a current military-affiliated student from National University, is holding a circle-time introduction where students share their names and a few personal interests. These short moments of sharing help break down social barriers and grow friendships across backgrounds.

Note that military-connected students should be able to self-identify as a military-connected kid, as opposed to being called out by a teacher. Be sure to create an environment where all students can share at their comfort level, without singling out military youth.

Tip: Leverage Harmony Academy's Meet Up practice, a daily forum in which students gather in a circle to establish and monitor expectations for how to treat one another, share experiences, solve problems that arise in the classroom, and build community.



Promote Acts of Service and Community Engagement

Promoting acts of service and community engagement can unite military and civilian youth through shared goals and values. A military-affiliated student enrolled at National University recommended these projects as a great way to foster a sense of community:

- 1. Holiday Cards.** The classroom can send holiday cards to deployed service members and retired service members.
- 2. Collecting Pennies for a Cause.** Students can vote for a cause together and collect pennies to raise money for it.
- 3. School Fundraiser.** Host a school-wide, recycling fundraising initiative and donate the funds to an organization that serves all youth, including military-affiliated youth, such as [ASYMCA](#), [Boys and Girls Club](#), or [Sesame Street for Military Families](#).

Be sure to recognize everyone's contribution, whether it's through small prizes or public celebrations, to reinforce the idea that every child has something meaningful to offer.



Tip: Leverage Harmony Lessons to help decide on which act of service to use (e.g., [Learning from Empathy lesson](#)) and how to work together to accomplish goals and tasks (e.g., [Collaboration in Action](#)).

Additional Recommendations for Educators and Parents

Educators

Educators play a vital role in supporting the well-being and success of military students. Educators can implement relationship-driven classroom activities using [Harmony's Everyday Practices](#) and [Units, Lessons & Activities](#) to create more inclusive and responsive learning environments. Here are six ways educators can support military-connected students:

- 1. Set Clear Expectations.** Military youth often face transitions that interrupt their academic and social routines. Set clear classroom expectations and consistent routines at the beginning of the school year with [Class Harmony Goals](#) to provide stability and reduce anxiety.
- 2. Check In Regularly.** Make time to privately check in with military-affiliated students. Ask how they're adjusting and let them know what resources are available to support them emotionally and academically. Use [Personal Harmony Goals](#) to help students create goals and reflect on their experiences.
- 3. Make Students Feel Seen.** Acknowledge the unique experiences of military students in class. Simple acts, like recognizing Month of the Military Child, or letting students share about their family's service during [Harmony Meet Ups](#), can go a long way!
- 4. Invite a Veteran to Speak to the Class.** Hosting veterans or active-duty service members for classroom talks fosters understanding, connection, and pride among military youth and their peers.
- 5. Promote Healthy Socialization.** Set up opportunities for military students to engage in one-on-one conversations and form lasting relationships using [Harmony's Buddy Up](#) practice.
- 6. Build Relationship-Driven Skills.** Support students in developing the needed resilience, well-being, and relationship skills to navigate challenges and nurture their relationships. Use [Harmony Units, Lessons, & Activities](#) to promote explicit instruction on emotion management, empathy, communication, and problem-solving.

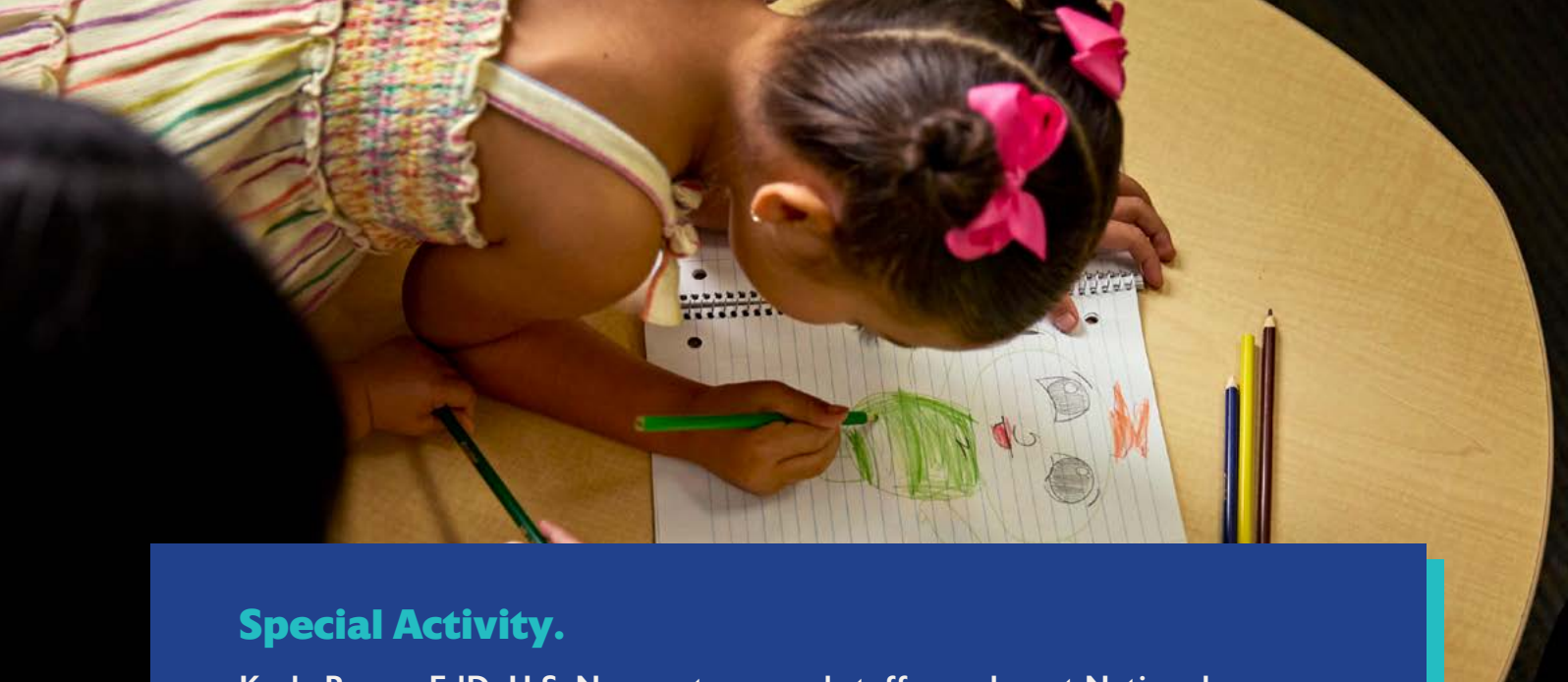
Parents

Parents, caregivers, and extended family members are a source of stability and comfort for military youth, especially during deployments or frequent relocations. One military-affiliated student enrolled at National University provided the following recommendations:

- 1. Practice Self-Care.** Parents should also care for their own well-being to model resilience and provide a strong emotional anchor for their child.
- 2. Foster Social Opportunities.** Help your child get involved in school or community activities where they can meet peers. Command Ombudsman and School Liaisons can help with this.
- 3. Keep a Routine.** Stick to regular schedules for meals, homework, and bedtime to help your children feel secure, especially during uncertain times.
- 4. Use Trusted Resources.** Leverage child-friendly resources like [Sesame Street for Military Families](#), which offer free downloadable PDFs, apps, and kid's games tailored to military life topics.

Here are additional recommendations to assist a child during a parent's military deployment (Military OneSource, 2024):

- 1. Stay Connected During Deployments.** Support military-affiliated youth in maintaining a bond with the deployed parent through activities like video calls, exchanging letters, reading books together virtually, and building care packages.
- 2. Support the Primary Caregiver.** Extended family and friends can assist by offering help with daily tasks or providing a listening ear. They can also attend school events, send encouraging messages, and reassure the child that they have a support system.



Special Activity.

Karla Payne, EdD, U.S. Navy veteran and staff member at National University, recommends creating two of the same photo albums, leaving a few pages blank. Give one to the service member and the other to your children. Carry the one for your children on you at all times. When your children are missing their deployed parent, pull out the album and encourage your children and the deployed service member to write little notes to one another on the blank pages.

Conclusion

Strong relationships create strong support systems and are key to the well-being and resilience of military youth. Prioritizing relationship-driven activities and culturally responsive practices can help military kids feel seen, supported, and better able to navigate the challenges of military life, contributing to better academic success, mental health, and meaningful connections wherever they go.

Educators, parents, caregivers, and community members play an important role in building supportive networks that extend beyond the classroom. We encourage you to leverage the Harmony Curriculum and the strategies outlined in this paper to ensure the well-being and success of military youth in your communities.

About the Authors



Nick Yoder, PhD, is the Associate Vice President at Harmony Academy at National University. He leads and manages the team that supports four core areas: research, policy, content, and professional learning — each with an equity lens. With a career in education spanning two decades, Dr. Yoder’s expertise in integrating social, personal, and academic development into educational policy and practice has been pivotal.



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