



BLOOM



A guide to military teens by military teens

For communities with military teens

Contributing Teen Writers

Matthew Oh

Elena Ashburn

Elizabeth Brown

Anna Verneti

Isaac Brown

William Martin

Elisabeth Howell

Genevieve Oakley

Ciara Settles

Catherine Mader

Ashlynn Sweet

Caleb Kim

Avery Turner

Loretta St. Andre'

Emma Moris

Ian Sparkman

Griffin Slover

Artwork by

Mia Smith

Kapinga Kambeya

Brianna V.

Claudia Garay

Elizabeth Brophy

Gabriella Hernandez

Imogene Sutgerland

Powered by the



**National
Military Family
Association**

BLOOM FOREWORD

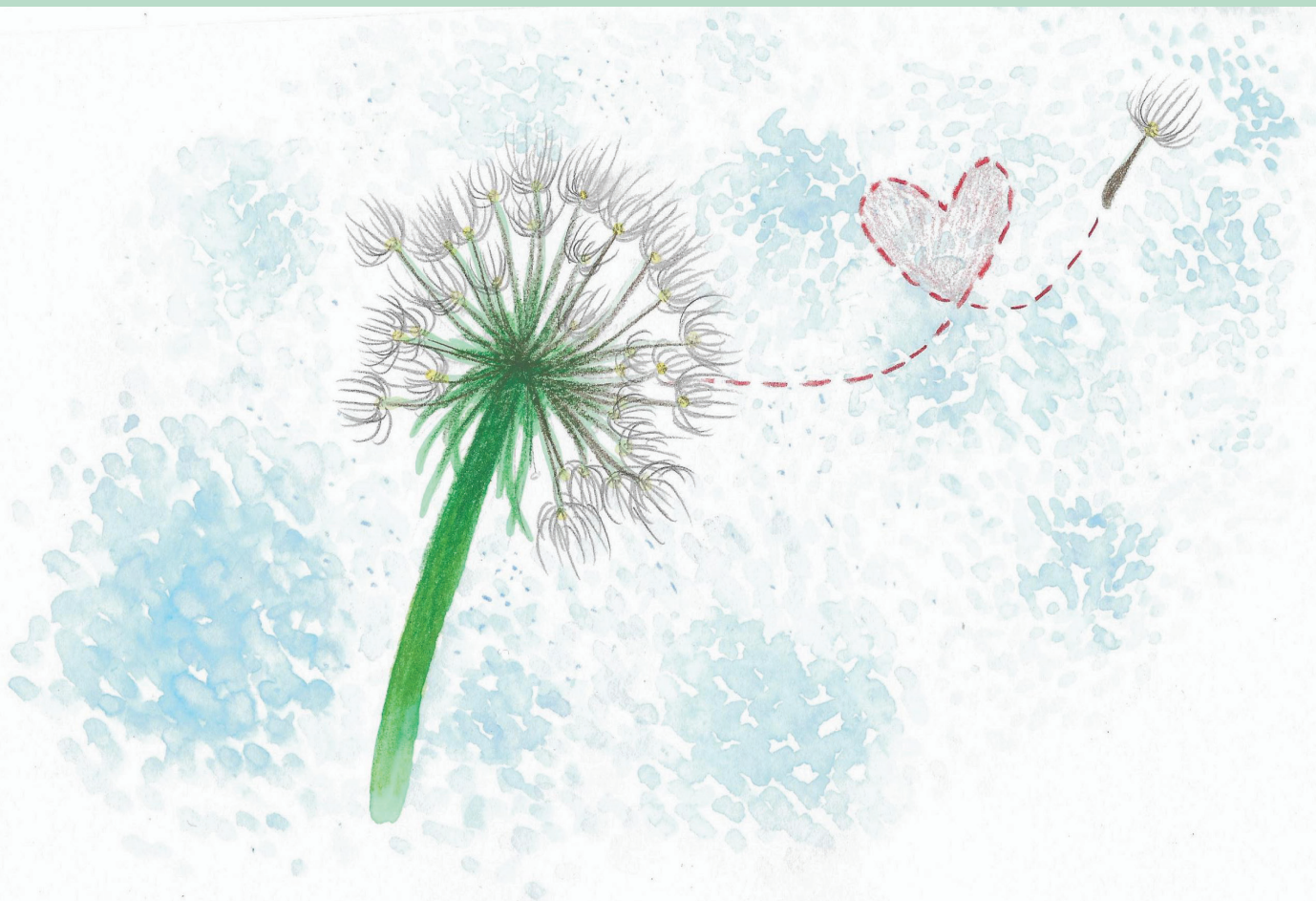
We are the voices of **Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen**, an organization created by and for military teens. Bloom was designed to empower, highlight, and connect military teens across the globe. We know firsthand how isolating military life can be, and through Bloom, we seek to create community and make sure military teens know they are not alone.

Since our launch in April 2020, we have published over 185 articles and featured the work of over 30 military teens from 14 states and 5 countries on our website. We have collaborated with a variety of organizations and leaders in the military community, including the Military Child Education Coalition and Blue Star Families. In 2023, Bloom became an official program of the National Military Family Association (NMFA). Through NMFA, we have been able to highlight the experience of military teens in publications such as People Magazine, National Public Radio, and the Department of Defense.

This guide has been made from the military teen's unique perspective. It not only includes the experiences of thousands of military teens we surveyed, but it also features art, writing, and graphics made by military teens. We hope that this guide gives you a better understanding of who we are and inspires you to support military teens in your community.

We are teens that are ready to be heard, and we hope that you are willing to listen.

Sincerely,
Elena Ashburn and Matthew Oh
Founders, Bloom: Empowering the Military Teen



How to Use This Guide:

Are you a middle or high school teacher with military-connected students in your class? A principal or superintendent with military kids under your jurisdiction? Maybe you're a coach or band director who had a new military-connected member join your organization recently, or a community leader planning projects to serve the military families in your area. Or maybe you're a parent, relative, or peer of a military teen hoping to understand them a little more.

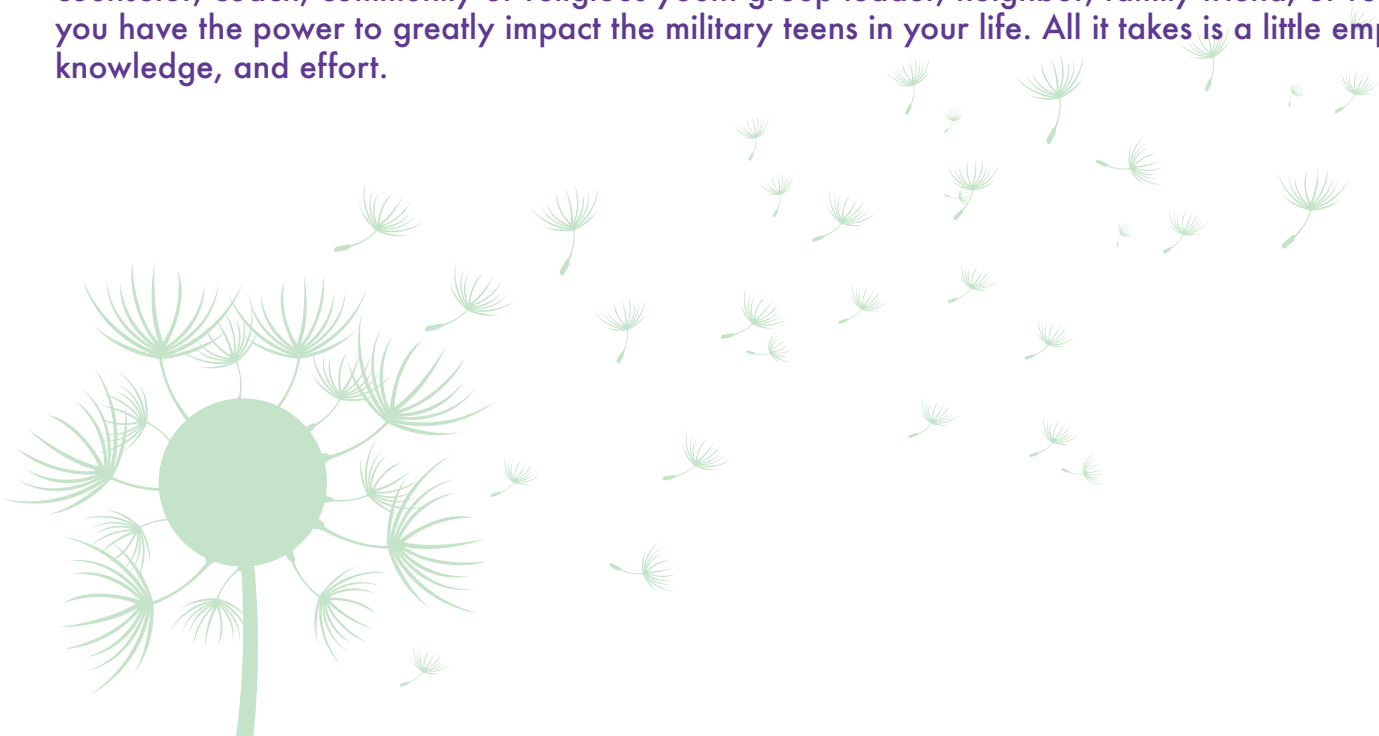
If any of the above apply to you, or even if you know just ONE person in your life who meets the criteria of a "military teen," this guide is for you!

Allow us to introduce ourselves. We are real life military teens, meaning one or both of our parents/guardians work for the U.S. Military. Our parents' service defines our lives in ways our communities need to understand.

In May 2021, NMFA and Bloom together fielded a military teen experience survey to better understand the current experience of the military teen community. We received over 2,000 responses from military teens aged 13 – 19 years old who shared a snapshot of their general and military-specific experiences, including information about their mental well-being, food security, and school experiences.

Our community is facing many difficulties. After all, our unique lifestyles create many challenges. You can read the full report [here](#). At a high level, using the Warwick-Edinburg Mental Wellbeing Scale, we learned that military teens struggle with adequate rates of mental well-being, feelings of disconnection in school and in their communities, and concern about their levels of food security. Despite all this, military teens still plan to continue their families' service and join the military at rates far higher than our non-military peers. Given all that, we've created this guide to provide some support for families, school leaders, and community organizations asking, "What can we do to help?"

In a way, community members serving military teens and their families also contribute to the readiness of our military. After all, what service member can focus 100% on their mission if they are worried about their children being taken care of? Whether you are a teacher, school counselor, coach, community or religious youth group leader, neighbor, family friend, or relative, you have the power to greatly impact the military teens in your life. All it takes is a little empathy, knowledge, and effort.



SECTION 1: MILITARY TEENS SERVE, TOO!

When you think of military teens, or even just the military, what do you think? The red, white, and blue of large flags standing stoically for a ceremony, or the ever-present green camouflage uniforms with badges, hats, berets, and camel-colored boots? What about the metal and steel guns being twirled to perfection, the high stakes training and obstacle courses? Typically, when people imagine the military, this is what they think of. This is what you may think of.

Or do you think about purple? The purple that represents military children in a sea of green. The purple camouflage represents a whole population of people that are seen but not always heard. You see them in your

school - new, nervously eyeing others or walking right up to you and saying, "Hello, I'm...". You are either confused by their introversion or surprised by their extroversion. What makes these kids tick?

Being a military teen you've somehow managed to hold tight to your character, even though you've had to face deployments, PCSing [a Permanent Change of Station, or military-mandated move], or missing parents. You have had to watch your dad or mom give you a hug and walk away, onto a plane, and fly off to another country to fight in a war that you barely know about or understand. You have had to keep fighting every millimeter, because military kids serve, too. They work hard, they volunteer, they support their families as well as their friends. They take on new responsibilities, they stay strong for their parents, all to show that while their service member is out there fighting, they will hold down the fort on the home front in their stead. Even though they are not the same battles, they have to fight through everything a service member fights through.



They have to fight through



PCSing



deployment



school transfers



mental health



community
(or a lack of it)

They have to fight to stay afloat, keeping pace with an ever-changing world while navigating the constant transitions of military life.

Military kids serve, too®.

There's a saying among military families that "home is where the (insert respective military branch) sends us."

The military controls a large portion of the lives of its people, and we feel that throughout our lives. They tell us where to live, when to move, and when a parent will be gone for potentially large-stretches of time. But all too often, we find ourselves in situations where those around us don't know anything about military culture, and it can create divides between our world and the civilian community we live in. When dealing with a military teen population, try to learn as much about our unique lifestyles as you can. Be careful not to stereotype or assume (military life isn't like the movies!) and if you don't know something, ask! Not only will it help you better support us, but it will allow you to form better relationships with us as well.



AIR FORCE

Role: responsible for aerial military operations, including air warfare and air defense, as well as the development of military space research

Service Members: Airmen



MARINE CORPS

Role: provides land combat, sea-based, and air-ground operations as the nation's maritime land-force branch

Service Members: Marines



ARMY

Role: supports national security, protects vital national interests, and fulfills national military responsibilities.

Service Members: Soldiers



NAVY

Role: serves as the combat-ready naval force, deterring aggression, and protecting the freedom of the seas

Service members: Sailors



COAST GUARD

Role: provides a variety of maritime support on America's waterways, ensuring safe and lawful commerce, providing port security, search and rescue, defending America's borders, and protecting the maritime environment

Service Members: Coast Guardsmen



SPACE FORCE

Role: organizes, trains, and equips space forces to protect U.S. and allied interests in space

Service Members: Guardians

Elements of Military Culture



While military life has a large impact on the teen, military life does not define the military teen. It is a mistake to link the military and the teen too closely. We serve our country alongside our service member parents but by no means are we governed by every aspect of military culture. In fact, military dependents are sometimes referred to as a subculture, as they lead unique lifestyles.

■ The label “**military brat**” is often used within the military community as a term of endearment for the children of service members, but for some, the label isn’t always well-received.

■ **Purple** is used as the color for military brats, since it is a combination of all of the colors of each military branch.

■ April marks the **Month of the Military Child**. During this month, special celebrations are often held in military communities to honor the sacrifices of military children. Of course, that doesn’t mean that they should be ignored for the other 11 months!



In Our Own Words:

As a military child, I often see that civilians don't understand the day to day life of a military teen or a service member. Being a service member is unlike anything else. My dad is on constant call 24/7, including holidays. We make our schedules around the military and plan ahead to make sure my dad can be there for the important things. It's unlike any other job. In my dad's words, 'It's another career path.' But it's a career path that makes the biggest impact.

Military teens are proud of their parents, but this comes with complicated emotions. Sometimes, for example, we find ourselves resenting parents for missing important events - birthdays, big games, school plays, graduations, even surgeries - while at the same time being proud of the work they are doing.

Here are some ways you can help your community learn more about military and military brat culture, as well as help military teens navigate the struggles of their lifestyle:

Recognize that the service of a soldier and the politics of war are different. Just because we are proud of our military parents doesn't mean we necessarily agree with our country's decision-makers - we serve our nation regardless of who is leading it. Nevertheless, realize that political statements "against" military service can be taken negatively by military teens. Instead, use statements that show you understand the difference between duty and debate.

When you befriend a military teen, please don't treat us differently. A change in your behavior could be suggesting pity and insincerity - no one appreciates that. In one military teen's words, "Don't cozy up to me. That's creepy."

If your school or organization has a newsletter, blog, or magazine that shares personal stories, allow us to contribute. We all have countless personal accounts we'd love to share!

As military teens, we understand just how valuable service to others is. You can develop that understanding by allowing us to lead a community service event/project.

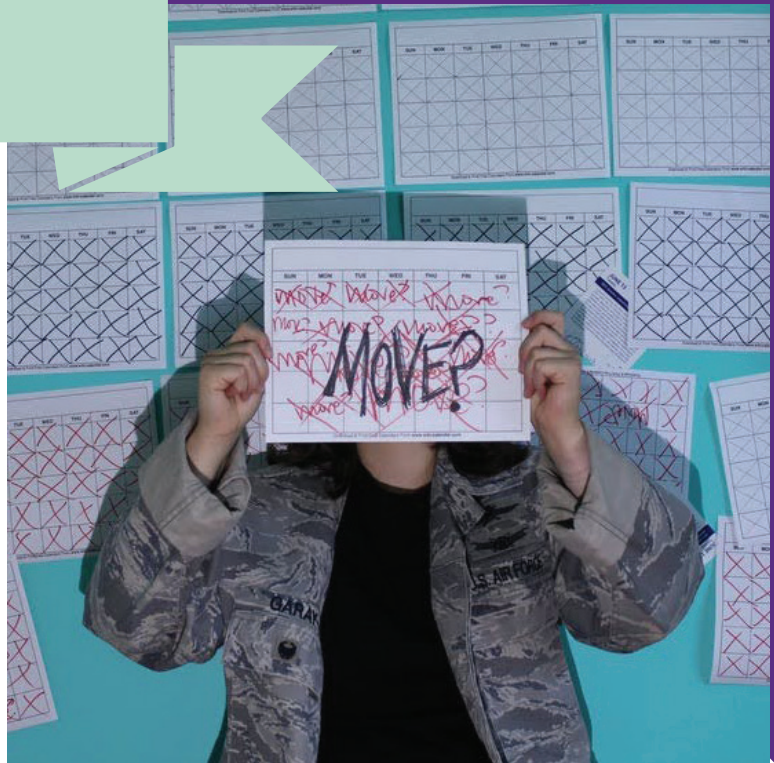
SECTION 2: MOVING

You are sitting in the back of your family's car, smashed between your younger sibling and a stack of suitcases, each a different color. While you're listening to your favorite song on your headphones, hoping to calm down a bit after the overwhelming pack out and load out, your mom is playing your sibling's favorite song on the car radio, and the two battle out in your ears. You silently pray that the car would drive just a little bit faster so you could meet your dear friend, personal space, again.

You finally stop, setting foot on that sweet, beautiful thing called ground. You're out of the cramped vehicle, stretching and staring up at your new house, your mind spinning and your heart pounding from the car ride. The house seems... bigger than the last one, like it might swallow you whole. You know it is empty because the moving truck is not there yet. If this move is like the last move, or the one before, your household goods won't arrive for another month.

You look around the neighborhood, noticing all the doors seem shut tight and the windows feel like they're barred shut... until you notice the kids playing ball in the yard next door. With hair still tousled, feet bare and shirt partly tucked in, you walk over and stick your hand out...

"Hi, I'm..."



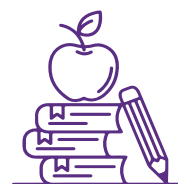
Change is truly one of the only constants for us military teens.

Because of the constant transition, we have to make new friends, adapt to new houses, and say goodbye many more times than the average human. While moving can definitely shape us into more worldly and knowledgeable people, it comes with its fair share of struggles.

When our serving parent receives orders to transfer to a new location, our families go through a process called a **Permanent Change of Station (PCS)**, which typically occurs every two to three years. PCS orders are based on our service member's job assignment and, as military teens, our families usually do not have a say in what our new location is. Moves generally happen in the summer, although many families can also move during the winter and at other random times throughout the year.

Moving to a new place may give us the opportunity to travel, giving us the ability to see different places within the United States and even visit internationally to Europe, Asia, or other overseas locations. A PCS can also be a fresh start. We can leave behind unwanted relationships, create new and diverse friendships, and grow our communication skills.

But it's not all sunshine and roses. We must disrupt our established friendships, adapt to multiple schools, and find new communities, all while grieving over what we have lost with each move. We must endure long periods of time without our belongings, sharing small quarters with our families, and sometimes extended travel by road or by plane. The stress of a PCS can create tension within our families, which is likely to negatively affect us. Typically, as we grow up, our social connections and community involvement grows stronger, especially with the technology we now use daily. Instead of getting easier, moving can become more difficult for us because of our emotional development and deeper understanding of our situation.



In 2026, military teens reported experiencing an average of **five permanent changes of station (PCS) moves** and had attended an average of **four different schools**.

In Our Own Words:

For me, moving has been one of my favorite parts of military life. However, not all moves are the same. One move, from Arizona to Texas, was especially hard due to the amazing experience I had in Arizona. It took me a little while to adjust to Texas, and just as I started to like TX, COVID-19 hit. This made it difficult to enjoy my time there. However, one great thing that pulled me through was Texas barbecue. Texas barbecue really was one thing that made Texas quite a bit more enjoyable. The moral of this story is, once you find your Texas barbecue, your time, wherever you are, will become more enjoyable.

In Our Own Words:

I don't want to stop moving. Moving around the world has become a major part of my life; it's like my body is on some sort of clock, and every two to three years I begin to get restless waiting for my dad's PCS orders. Why would I stop traveling and pursuing a world far beyond what I can see out of my window on a Boeing 787 Dreamliner that's going to carry me to my family's next duty station? Each step forward is a unique experience because no one has been where you are at that exact moment, experiencing that day in a new place.



In Our Own Words:

Simply put, moving might be the worst part of the military brat life. For some, moving is a fresh start. But for me, it feels like I'm forced to press the reset button every time I start to feel comfortable in my new environment. It's as if life is slapping me across the face every time I start to smile.

In Our Own Words:

It was the summer before my first year of high school and I had been stationed in Copperas Cove, Texas for four whole years. Copperas Cove was basically where I grew up, where I found the things I loved, where I found the people I loved. I considered Copperas Cove my home, my hometown, even! And now it was all gone. In that year, I had already been struggling with panic attacks and what I would label as a mild sort of depression. It seemed like my body was just waiting for something extreme to happen because, after I got the news we were moving, these things pushed into high gear. I was crying non-stop and I would get panic attacks because of minor inconveniences, small things I could easily fix. Most everything ended with me in tears, shaking and sobbing, from math quizzes to school performances.



In Our Own Words:

Moving is inconvenient and causes so many credit transfer issues. In my experience, my many credits from freshman year disappear[ed], causing my final year, this year, senior year to be difficult and hard.

Military teens deal with transitions regularly, yet it still isn't a piece of cake. We need the support of their community in order to transition smoothly and quickly.

Here are some ways you can help with this process:



Oftentimes, when we move into a new community, it's awkward. We don't know anyone or anything about the new place. Usually, it takes at least six months to gain our footing. Instead of watching us wander around lost, offer to show off your favorite restaurants, attractions, and stores. A warm welcome is exactly what we wish for.



Ask us about where we have lived! Many think that asking will make us miss the place too much, but it will actually help you get to know us better, and it may help you learn more about our world!



We may seem tough and resilient - and we are - but we are not without our own emotions. A lot about being a military kid, especially moving, entails a lot of emotional work. While we are going through our roller coaster of crying, angry outbursts, and just extremely emotional times, you can provide us support and understanding. It doesn't matter how long we've been a military kid, it is still rough. With your welcome, hospitality, and help, most of us will eventually re-acclimate and flourish in our new setting.



Detaching from our last duty station, and moving to another, can leave us feeling alone. Help us by finding or creating activities to connect the military community to your community and show your support.



Sports, music groups, and other extracurricular activities are part of the few constants of our lives. Not only do they offer an "in" to the community, they put us into an immediate group of people with similar interests. When possible, try to be lenient with tryout dates and admission cut-offs. Most military families move in the summer, so we often miss tryouts for fall activities. Please remember that our parents don't control when we move either - the government is sending us on their timeframe, and if we could plan it ourselves, we would have been there on time!



Connection is huge after moving. It seems as soon as a solid, stable, long-sought-for connection is made, it's disrupted by another move. You can try to change that mindset by asking if we're involved in any clubs/sports and helping us get involved if we aren't.



When the time comes for us to move away, don't just say 'bye.' Work to get our class, group, or house of worship involved in keeping relationships thriving through email or social networking sites. Start group chats, follow us on social media! Always try to keep in touch; it really helps us when we're transitioning to know that we haven't lost all of our friends.



While looking on the bright side is helpful, we need to be able to process the difficulties of our various situations. Toxic positivity and ignoring the negatives are not helpful. Instead of sugar coating it, be honest and sincere - that is most wanted and needed.



SECTION 3: DEPLOYMENT

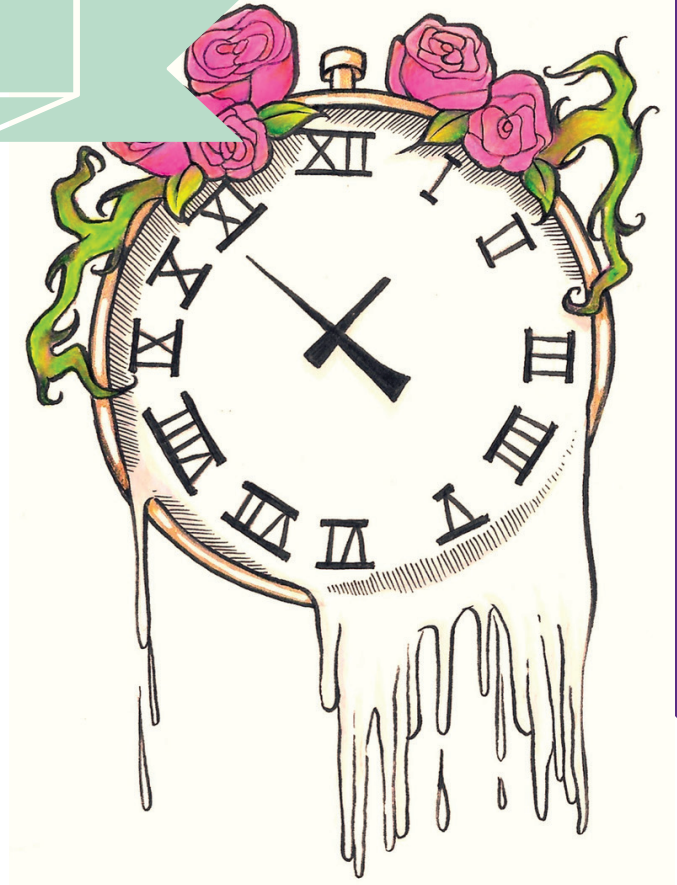
"Wait, you're leaving again?"

"I'm sorry champ," he says with a sad smile on his face, his eyes heavy from exhaustion.

"But you said you wouldn't leave again for a while!"

"I know what I said, I'm sorry," he says as he slowly rolled up the window. "I'll be back home soon, I promise."

"That's what you said last time..."



But he's already too far down the road, and soon that familiar car passes out of sight. He is gone again, and this time it will be for a year. He hasn't been present for most of your childhood, and you're about to graduate high school. He was off fighting in another war, and the chances of him not coming home continue to increase. You slowly walk back to your front porch, feeling the crunch of dead summer grass underneath your shoe. His favorite rocking chair is slowly rocking back and forth, being influenced by the wind. It's almost like it's inviting you to sit down and reminisce. You used to sit with him, in the summer, and listen to the crickets. You would talk and laugh and listen to the world around you. Yet no matter how many times you begged him not to leave again, he would not listen. He could not listen.

He had missed birthdays, Christmases, sports games, recitals, and everything in between. He would miss the first day of your senior year too. It was getting darker now, the crickets had begun their choir. He was not allowed to call, and soon, you would forget the sound of his voice. Still, you love him. You will still cry tears of joy as he walks in the door. You will still love him all the same and you are grateful that he comes back at all.

Most Americans only see war on the news and can separate it from our daily lives. Military youth can't do that.

Our parents go to war. The news is real life for us. Deployed parents can be gone for 15 months at a time (or longer, even) and serve multiple deployments (sometimes with little time between them). During deployments, we are separated from our parents but still expected to carry on life as usual. We have to keep up our grades, manage extracurriculars, and even help care for our family while simultaneously worrying about our serving parent's safety. This can be a large burden, and it's during these trying times that we need the support of our community the most.

Survey Snapshot



In 2026, military teens reported experiencing an average of **four deployments lasting three months or longer.**



In Our Own Words:

A twelve-month deployment to Iraq quickly became three years in the Middle East, with only one year in between each departure for my entire family to be together. My earliest memories of my dad aren't of him grilling in the backyard or watching movies with me on the couch, but are instead of small packages addressed to us in his handwriting and his voice over the phone a few times a week. Memories of crafting glitzy "Welcome Home" signs and eagerly scanning the lines of people coming out of airport terminals dominate my early childhood, and "Daddy" always seemed like a faraway concept in a faraway land. I knew he loved me and I loved him, but my dad was never really a tangible person, a steady figure in my life.



In Our Own Words:

We didn't know it then, but this initial confusion and chaos molded a path of pain and suffering into our first weeks of being alone. Our pessimistic view of deployment seemed to mask every good opportunity and highlight every bad one. For example, when my sister got injured in a swimming accident, we all overreacted and handled the situation very poorly. The same goes for when a mild earthquake hit our area shortly after my dad left. The shaking, although pretty mild, caused panic for us, because we had never experienced one. These events, combined with our bleak mentality, led us to repeat the phrase 'if only Dad were here' over and over as if doing so would magically solve our problems.

The typical American teenager has to navigate relationships, school work, college applications, and more. When you add in military life and a deployment, it can create a very stressful environment for a military teen.

Here are some ways you can support us through deployments or activations that take our serving parent away from home:



Be honest with us. We know the real consequences of war, but we can also grasp facts that younger children can't, like the very real dangers our serving parents face, the concept of just how long a year is, and the usefulness of practical coping strategies.

If there are more than a few military teens in your community, start afterschool clubs for kids with deployed parents. It's helpful to know that we're not alone.



Connect with our parent at home. That person will give you a better picture of what we're going through.

Be aware of even casual discussions about war. Naturally, military youth will take perspectives on conflict a little more to heart when our mom or dad is deployed or fighting.



Listen to us. Having a person outside our home who knows our situation gives us a safe place to talk about the deployment. Many times we won't share information with the parent who is still at home for fear of "rocking the boat." Our parents get stressed out during deployments, too. You can send care packages from your group to the deployed parent.



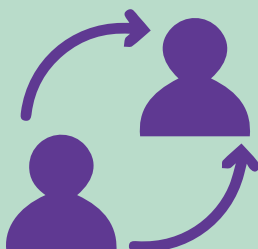
SCHOOLS, establish a policy that accommodates families dealing with separation good-byes and reunions as well as Rest and Recuperation (R&R) leave. Be sure the school counselor knows if our parent is deployed.

Be neutral. Language is powerful. Using terms like “parents” for back-to-school nights, fairs, or permission slips automatically assumes every teen has two parents at home or even just one parent at home. Create an environment where single parents, guardians, and grandparents feel welcome – our serving parent will appreciate that just as much as we will. Consider using terms like “caregiver” whenever possible to be more inclusive.



Let us be kids for a while. We still have a child inside of us who just wants to have fun, even if we’re faced with adult challenges. Give us a safe place where we can unwind.

Ask how our school, house of worship, or club can support our family. Mowing the lawn, carpooling, tutoring, or babysitting younger siblings are ways to shoulder some of the tasks the military youth may have taken on while dad or mom is away. Be specific with your offer. Saying, “We’d like to have your family over for dinner this week,” feels less like charity than “Do you need help with meals?”



SECTION 4: EDUCATION



You are sitting in school, tapping your foot nervously on the ground. All you can think about is the upcoming move. Leaving behind your friends, old and new, along with the family that for once was close by. Your eyes are focused anywhere but the front of the classroom because you know that everything that was being said wouldn't matter... you were just going to move to a new school and learn something different. And then your stomach begins to twist and turn because you realize that you're going to move and you are probably going to have to retake half your classes anyway...

All the fears and past experiences float to the front of your mind. "Are they going to accept my transcripts? My credits? Honors vs. APs? Are they going to change my grades? Are they going to have the same graduation requirements? Are they going to make me retake a class or a grade? What if they change my GPA? What if my new school thinks my old school wasn't up to par? What about my college applications?" You are already mentally preparing for your new school to rip your transcript to shreds, saying it's not up to their standards. **It all makes you feel that every school you go to is trying to make you fail as soon as you enroll.**

Even after having moved to your new school, you are constantly fretting if something might change, and every little detail seems like its own battle. Even though you have done this process before, it seems to get harder and harder, and your will seems to lessen. **But you keep fighting for your education because you know it is worth it, not only for your present learning, but your future as well.**

Adapting to a new location generally means adapting to a new school. Middle and high school are important times in the life of any teenager, including military teens. The academic transition between schools can often create puzzles for us, as it often takes a while to process records, choose new classes, and adjust to new standards. As every state has its own standards, moving to a school in a new region sometimes requires major adjustments.

Common difficulties include:

- having to retake a class to satisfy new requirements
- having to catch up and take additional coursework to meet new standards
- lacking motivation and rigor due to lower standards than a previous school
- falling behind because of higher standards than a previous school

Although extracurricular activities are a crucial way for us to adjust to a new location, it may be difficult for us to participate in one due to tryout deadlines or other important dates. Programs that start in the summer are especially tricky, as that is typically when we move.

Making friends at a new school is always one of our top concerns, as every student body has a different personality and demeanor. Especially at schools with small military populations, it can be hard to break into friend groups that have been together for a long time. Additionally, some of us transition at odd times in the academic year, for instance, the middle of a semester. This creates all sorts of problems and means we have to catch up, socially and academically.

“

As a military teen, I feel most seen and understood by the people who recognize that constantly moving shapes you in ways that aren't always obvious. Other military kids especially get it. We don't have to overexplain what it feels like to leave friends behind or start over at a new school.

16-year-old child of Navy Sailor

”

“

The things that make me feel seen or heard are my friends due to the fact that they do not ask about my parents and their service – they just care about who I am as a person and what my goals are in life.

14-year-old child of Army Retiree

”

I definitely appreciate the military kid accounts on Instagram and TikTok. The content posted is very relatable and makes it feel like I'm not the only one. I also really enjoy talking to my military friends who understand what it's like.

17-year-old child of Navy Sailor

Because moving is so hard on military kids, there are certain policies in place to help.

The Military Interstate Compact outlines practices for equal treatment of transitioning military students and allows for uniform treatment as military children transfer between public school districts in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and DoDEA schools. Basically, it creates an equal playing field for us as we move state-to-state.

What Is The Interstate Compact?

The issues covered by the Compact include

Enrollment: Educational Records, Immunizations, Kindergarten & First Grade Entrance Age

Placement & Attendance: Course & Educational Program Placement, Special Education Services, Placement Flexibility, Absence Related to Deployment Activities

Graduation: Waiving courses required for graduation if similar course work has been completed; flexibility in accepting state exit or end-of course exams, national achievement tests, or alternative testing in lieu of testing requirements for graduation in the receiving state; and allowing a student to receive a diploma from the sending school instead of the receiving school

Students Covered

- Dependents of active duty members of the uniformed services, including members of the National Guard and Reserve on active duty orders (Title 10)
- Members or veterans who are medically discharged or retired within one year
- Members who die on active duty, for a period of one year after death
- Uniformed members of the Commissioned Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and United States Public Health Services (USPHS)

Students Not Covered

Some military-connected teens in your community are not covered by the Interstate Compact. Among them are:

- Children of Guardsmen and Reservists who are actively drilling but not on Title 10 orders
- Children of parents who retired from the military
- Children of veterans

You can learn more about the compact and who is covered [here](#).

MILITARY INTERSTATE CHILDREN'S COMPACT COMMISSION

The National Military Family Association is an ex-officio member of the Compact and works collaboratively with the education community to enforce the Compact and educate parents and schools about the Compact to ensure military children receive the best education possible.

If families are concerned about Compact enforcement or want to learn more, they can contact the state's Compact Commissioner. Contact information can be found at mic3.net.



In Our Own Words:

I would say my biggest struggle as a military teen would be having gaps in my education where one school says 'oh, you'll learn this later on.' Then we move and the next school says, 'you should have already been taught this.'



In Our Own Words:

My Individualized Education Program (IEP) doesn't transfer well, and I often get left behind in class because I struggle to keep up and they won't slow down for me or give me the accommodations I need. Every time we move, they retest me for the IEP and that can take months to get the test done and then back. By that time, I am six months into school and falling behind because they won't take the accommodations the last school gave me.

In Our Own Words:

Nearly every move I go through I have some sort of transcript issues. Most are small, which tend to be them misreading my transcript and not assigning me the right classes, which is usually something that's easy to overcome with one meeting. However, the main issue I ran into regarding transcripts was when I moved overseas. Although it was an American DoDEA school, they completely didn't recognize my physical education or health credits and they labeled it as the end of the discussion. While it doesn't impact my education too greatly, it creates a huge annoyance when I have to retake simple classes instead of getting to try a new class, especially when the school didn't help with solving the problem at hand.



In Our Own Words:

I lived in North Carolina at the beginning of my high school experience. North Carolina does not have separate maths, rather they have what they call "NC Math", which is a combination of multiple math subjects into one class. If I didn't have to move, this wouldn't have been a big deal since I would have completed three years of math.

School transitions can be extremely rough, but they can also result in positive change. New friendships, knowledge, and opportunities all come with each new school, but they can be hard to find without the right support. **Here are some ways you can assist the military students transitioning into your school community:**



Invest in us by helping us develop friendships or mentorships.

This is likely not the first time that we have left friends behind, and while the process helps us become more resilient, making friends is still hard. If you can help us get settled, we will build large and diverse groups of friends.

Identify our specific needs, because every military teen is different.

Never assume that something is true of one military teen simply because it was for another.



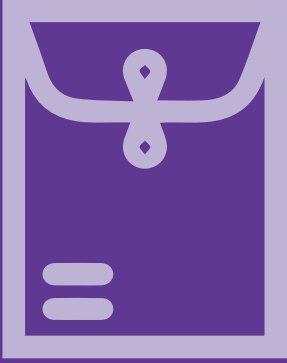
Education leaders, try to be flexible.

Different states and schools have different standards, and we often face an upward climb adjusting. Whenever possible, accept credits and transcripts that may conflict, as inconsistencies are most certainly not our fault.

Sports, music groups, and other extracurricular activities are part of the few constants of our lives.

Not only do they offer an “in” to the community, they put us into an immediate group of people with similar interests. When possible, try to be lenient with tryout dates and admission cut-offs for school-run activities. Most military families move in the summer, therefore missing tryouts for fall activities.





Schools can create a “welcome wagon” packet filled with information for students transferring in the middle of the school year. Contacts for local resources or even popular hangouts help us get acclimated to the area more quickly.

Create a buddy system or transition program for newly relocated families and a student peer support group that matches new arrivals with student mentors.

These mentors can make sure we learn to navigate their new school and don't have to eat lunch alone.



School counselors should ensure all transcripts from previous schools are current and in the student's record.

Educate your group about reaching out to the “new kid.”

We are often told to make new friends, but the community must reciprocate to make the connection happen. Don't be afraid to talk to a stranger; it may be awkward and embarrassing at first, but once that is past, you could have an amazing new friend!



Student Transition Programs

WHAT IS A STUDENT TRANSITION PROGRAM?

All schools with military students should invest in a student transition program! These can be a club or committee, and they are responsible for acclimating new students to the school by providing tours, helping them meet new people, ensuring that they are not lonely or uncomfortable, and educating the school on how to better serve new students.

Student 2 Student (S2S) is a great program from the Military Child Education Coalition that trains and establishes such clubs in middle and high schools, and starting an S2S chapter is a great way to build a solid transition program. But any school has the power to create a great transition program even if it isn't S2S. Here are some tips to get started!

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN START A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT TRANSITION PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS



Step One: Find a sponsor

A good starting point for any program is to first find a sponsor. A good route for this is to go through your student council or talk to your school's counselors about starting the program as they will be the most connected and well suited to finding out when new students are coming to your school.



Step Two: Find interest

Talk to the students in your school about becoming "ambassadors" for the program. These kids will be the ones first introduced to the new students and the "face" of the school. A good selling point is that student transition programs are amazing for collecting volunteer and community service hours.



Step Three: Talk to Administration

Every school, military or not, can use a student transition program. The next step is to talk to your principal and find out if a student transition program would be something they could support in the school. Getting any support you can from administration will help in every way possible as you will have to work closely with them to get information on new students.



Step Four: Putting it all together

Once you have your sponsor(s), 'ambassadors' and approval from admin, your Student Transition Program is ready to roll. The next thing to do is welcome new students into your school and help them transition into their new community the best they can.



Tips and Tricks



Make welcome packages.

This can be anything from a little fun size candy bar with a message on it (welcoming the student to the school) to a baggie with some school merch. These packages are a good ice breaker and give the new student something to have.



Hold Welcome Events.

Memorable orientations, meet and greets, or hail and farewells can greatly enhance a new student's experience.



Optimize your Tour Experience.

Make sure that all new students know their way around the building by planning out an informative tour.



Make good first impressions.

Ensure that all of your student and staff volunteers are trained how to be friendly and courteous to new students so that they feel welcome.

SECTION 5: MENTAL HEALTH

Through teary eyes, you peer down at your watch.

2:04 a.m.

Great, you think. I've got to be at school in 5 hours and I'm wide awake.

You will your eyes to stop welling up with tears and your body to fall asleep. But, you can't help it. You are struggling, you are feeling a lot of big feelings and aren't sure how to handle them. Growing up in a military household, kids are expected to be resilient. You have moved and experienced a lot in your life, and sometimes, it feels like you should know how to adjust to these new changes.

But, that's not true. It is not fair to expect yourself to know how to deal with everything this lifestyle throws at you. Moving, deployments, leaving friends, changing schools, it's all difficult. It is valid to feel a lot of big feelings, but it is important that you remember that you are never alone in these feelings. You will always have someone out there supporting you.



Since first fielding the Military Teen Experience Survey in 2021, NMFA has consistently reported that the majority of military-connected adolescents experience low to moderate mental well-being. In 2026, while the share reporting high mental well-being held steady, a greater proportion fell into the moderate category than in previous years, and fewer were categorized as experiencing low mental well-being.

military teen well-being





A casual scroll on social media may have us running into images of all our “old” friends making new friends or having new experiences without us. This **“fear of missing out”** often plagues those of us who leave behind a beloved school or friend group – potentially while we’re still trying to make new friends and get settled.

Living in an environment that values physical fitness can also create **body image issues** that we have to contend with - all while moving every few years and constantly rebuilding our support systems.

On top of that, military teens’ **wellbeing is low**. Leaning on validated instruments for our 2021 Military Teen Experience Survey, we worked with NMFA to get an accurate understanding of military teens’ mental health. The results weren’t good: 42% of respondents reported low mental well-being on the Warwick scale; the majority (45%) reported moderate mental well-being. Only 13% of respondents indicated a high level of mental well-being. **[Read the full report here.](#)**

Military teens have to sort through all of this and more, on top of wrapping their heads around their parent’s involvement in a war. Give us space and support when we are navigating these topics.



In Our Own Words:

When my unorthodox move came out of nowhere, it ultimately hurt me in ways I didn't even imagine at the time I got the news. I still have yet to recover socially, I feel as though I will never make a genuine friend at school again and that I can't hold a conversation anymore, that I'm outwardly boring, insensitive, needlessly confrontational and intolerable, even, without any sort of support to help me cope or at least avoid my own senseless, detrimental self-loathing.



I am an anxious person; I overthink, worry, and get stressed just like a large majority of my peers (though reasons and degrees of stress may vary from person to person). My anxiety is calmed with routine and consistency, from keeping the same wallpaper on my phone for the past three years, to the habit I unknowingly created for coping with moving: falling into a state of derealization around two months before a move, then disconnecting with friends and activities.



In Our Own Words:

Once I moved and was attempting to adapt to the major change, I found myself in this depressive and hopeless state constantly. I couldn't shake the feeling of sadness and lack of motivation off of me; it got to the point where it took a day's energy to crawl out of bed, ultimately affecting my ability to take care of myself and my schoolwork. I talked about my frequent struggles with parents, who scheduled appointments for me to meet with a counselor every week to figure out the source of the issue. Due to this crucial step of reaching out for support, I was diagnosed with depression and started receiving the treatment and counseling I needed.

What Can You Do to help?



Parents and guardians: consider allowing your teen to visit friends as often as possible. Long weekends, spring break, and summer all present opportunities for a teen to take a train, plane, or car ride to see their friend. Connection can help us overcome some of the worst mental health issues; please support us to maintain the connections that matter most to us.



Teens need peer groups.

If you've surveyed your organization and know who the military teens are, create a group just for us and those who support us. Offer us outlets to talk and ensure we are aware that our feelings are valid and can be felt and shown.



When appropriate, encourage teens to seek professional guidance from a therapist or counselor. Mental health is just as important as physical health and deserves the same amount of attention.



Let teens know you are there for them! Reaching out when we are struggling can be extremely hard; letting us know that you are always willing to help and giving us a space to share can be encouraging.



Be willing to have tough and honest conversations with us if we are comfortable. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is talk to us.



SECTION 6: COMMUNITY

“So, where are you from?”

You sigh. You hate this question, mainly because you don’t have an answer. You don’t come from a singular place; **you have moved many times and lived all over the world.** But that isn’t an appropriate answer. The nice girl in your English class trying to get to know you doesn’t need to hear a list of all the bases where your family was stationed. You’re afraid she just won’t understand that you are from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

“Kansas,” you say. It is where you lived last, where you just came from. That counts, right? It was a lot easier when you didn’t have to explain yourself. On a base, everyone was a part of this transient lifestyle and understood that you can be from many places. But here, you feel like you constantly have to explain yourself to everyone.

Moving away from the military community also meant you moved away from a support system. The military is like a family; we all look out for each other.

Your neighbors brought your family dinner once a week when your parent was in Afghanistan, and you helped babysit their children when their service member was deployed. You miss having a second family that will always be there to support you, no matter what.



While military teens want you to know that the military doesn't define them, the military community is still a huge part of our lives. **When we are removed from that community, we struggle with isolation and disconnection from those around us who don't know.** It can be a tricky situation to navigate.



In Our Own Words:

As military brats we must find a way to engage in some form of community. Our lives will be too lonely without it. Within the military community, we can find people like ourselves who understand what we are experiencing. We need to be able to make heartfelt connections with people who can help us, and we can then help them in return.

In Our Own Words:

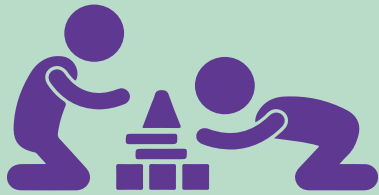
Not all places will have a tight community and not everyone will have the same experiences. Some people will have restrictions on what they can say and do. Understand that military and embassy kids are everywhere, and when you feel as if the community is lost, try to build it. Whether it is in school or in a neighborhood, try to make that community tighter. You never know the impact you will have on people in helping them connect with others like them.



In Our Own Words:

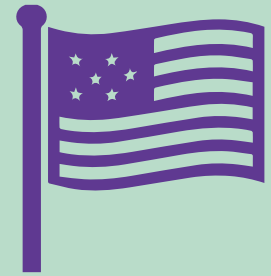
Growing up in civilian-dominated communities, it was extremely hard to talk about my life as a military kid because not many people could relate to my life.

What Can You Do to Help?



Reach out to the military kids in your community! It can be difficult for military kids to find their place in a community where everyone has known each other for years, and just saying hello or offering to include them in something is so appreciated.

Our community is full of organizations like the National Military Family Association that can help you understand the experiences of our military families and connect you with resources that can help those in your community. Learn more at [MilitaryFamily.org](https://militaryfamily.org).



Conclusion

Military teens. Who are we?

We can safely tell you that we are NOT those adorable, purple-wearing, American flag-waving toddlers surrounded by a field of dandelions that you see in patriotic ads or homecoming videos. Not anymore, at least.

We are NOT those uniform-sporting, rank-bearing, proudly saluting service members, the men and women (a.k.a. our parents) bravely defending our country in the Armed Forces. Not yet, at least.

And we are NOT your typical teenagers, coping with hormonal changes, recovering from rough breakups, balancing high school, stressing over college, all while trying to be "cool." We deal with all this, and then some.

So what are we, then?



We are teens who have been uprooted.



We are teens who have seen the world.



We are teens who are sometimes separated from our parents for extended periods of time.



We are teens who stand behind our parents as they guard our freedoms – yours and mine.



We are teens who must leave friends behind and stay in touch remotely.



We are teens who make new friends from all walks of life.



We are teens who know loss, change, and uncertainty.



We are teens who know perseverance, resilience, and adaptation.



We are teens who are hurting.



We are teens who dream big.



We are teens who you can learn a lot from.



We are teens who can learn a lot from you.



We are teens who need your support.



And we are teens who are advocating for our voice.



