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Protective School Communities

(Accepted Draft)

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Child Maltreatment and Military-Connected Youth: Developing Protective School Communities

Since the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, more than 2 million school-aged youth have had a parent enlist in the military. About 1.2 million of these youth have experienced the deployment of a parent. Not many educators know that military-connected youth are in every civilian public school in the United States; the majority of military youth are concentrated in more than 200 civilian public school districts, known as military-connected school districts. These districts have a significant number of military-connected students, more than 3% of the total student enrollment or 400 military-connected students. Given the stress of the wars on military families and children, it is surprising that, until 2011, no research review investigated the school experiences of military-connected youth. In addition, few researchers had developed school-based interventions for military-connected youth and professional development for educators.

A research team at USC and Bar Ilan University conducted a review of studies conducted since the Vietnam War and found that war-related stress drives child maltreatment in military families. A study by Rentz and her

colleagues, for instance, found that child maltreatment rates in military families have doubled since the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Multiple and prolonged deployments and exposure to veteran trauma disrupt family relationships and financial stability. The deployment cycle also impacts the mental health and well-being of not only service members, but also left-behind caregivers and children. A left-behind caregiver is often the sole financial provider and can expect to move to new communities far from family and social support. Thus, left-behind caregivers not only cope with emotional stress, but also may have feelings of social isolation. Even when seeking help, left-behind caregivers and service members may have difficulty locating health care providers, who are aware of military life issues. In schools, civilian teachers, school leaders, and psychologists often lack awareness of military life events and their effects on the social and emotional health of students. In sum, multiple life stressors and the lack of social support in civilian communities place military youth at risk of abuse and neglect.

Persistent abuse and neglect can have an adverse effect on the school outcomes and academic achievement of military-connected youth. Studies have indicated that child maltreatment co-occurs with low academic achievement and dropout as well as depression, suicidal ideation, behavioral problems, school violence and victimization, substance use, and gang involvement. Findings from our studies indicate that deployment and

multiple school transitions drive negative outcomes, known to co-occur with child abuse and neglect. In a study of adolescent military youth in southern California, Dr. Tamika Gilreath and her colleagues at USC found significantly higher rates of weapon carrying and verbal and physical victimization among students with a parent or sibling in the military, when compared to their civilian peers. In addition, the experience of a family deployment was associated with a higher likelihood of being physically and verbally victimized. Similarly, Dr. Julie Cederbaum and her USC colleagues found that both military connection and family deployment were associated with higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation, and lower rates of well-being.

The Need for Whole School Primary Prevention Approaches to Child Maltreatment

How do civilian school professionals typically respond to military child maltreatment? Throughout the United States, teachers, school leaders, counselors and other school staff are mandated reporters for children they suspect to be victims of maltreatment. Referred child abuse and neglect cases are subsequently handled by law enforcement, local child welfare agencies and the legal system. This approach aims to protect children from further abuse and neglect, but can have adverse consequences on the long-term safety and well-being of maltreated children, particularly in military families. For instance, a military family may have already experienced much recent household instability, as a result of multiple moves and repeated

deployments. Child welfare social workers, law enforcement, and legal professionals may lack awareness of the stress of military life events, and thus fail to provide access to military-specific social supports (e.g. military family support groups). Referred cases could result in unnecessary child trauma and more harm to the military parent and siblings.

The narrow response to child abuse is reflected in how schools attempt to solve an array of student problems. Predominant in the clinical psychology and social work practice fields, a clinical intervention approach targets only a small number of students—those who exhibit the most severe levels of negative social and academic outcomes. For instance, school-based clinical intervention approaches for children with suicidal ideation and severe depression include referrals to mental health agencies and school counseling. For students with severe learning disabilities and/or behavioral issues, special education services are provided.

While the clinical approach helps support the most vulnerable students, this model of response is limited in three primary ways. First, the clinical intervention approach focuses on a small group of students and locates a specific problem in the student, while failing to respond to contributing factors in the school and family. In the case of military-connected students in special education, schools may provide academic interventions for severe learning gaps and refer cases of child abuse to social services agencies. But, such interventions fail to address an array of

social and emotional difficulties stemming from multiple school transitions and deployment. Second, the clinical approach falls short of providing families and children with access to culturally appropriate wrap-around services. In the case of military families and children, civilian school counselors and teachers, even in areas near military installations, often lack awareness of local family and individual counselors, military parent support groups and community organizations aimed at promoting family well-being in times of stress. Third, the clinical approach does not transform the daily actions and awareness of civilian school leaders, teachers, and other school professionals, which could lead to the social isolation of military families and children. Recent qualitative studies have uncovered the lack of sensitivity that civilian school professionals display to military families and children. Insensitivities range from political comments about veterans and not accommodating students when a parent leaves for a long period of service. Insensitivity and inaction create unsafe and emotionally hostile school environments for military children and families, especially those coping with abuse.

Applying a Whole School Primary Prevention Model to Military-Connected Youth

In order to support military-connected youth in times of stress, it is imperative that civilian schools approach child maltreatment with a whole school primary prevention mindset. Primary prevention practices stem from

decades of practice in public health, where programs prevent diseases or injuries and promote general well-being, rather than curing or treating the symptoms of disease in its late stages (e.g. health promotion programs). Schools with a primary prevention model, for instance, employ school-wide practices and procedures that seek reductions in a wide range of negative student outcomes (e.g. violence, poor mental health, academic failure, low motivation), and increases in the positive outcomes (e.g. well-being, resilience) of military-connected youth.

All members of a school community must enhance their awareness of military life events and transform their practices and procedures. This is achievable through a whole school model of organizational change. Whole-school reform models aim to improve a wide range of social, academic, and emotional outcomes of all youth in a school community. In particular, the whole school model helps provide opportunities for the most vulnerable youth populations and their families to develop strong relationships with school leaders, teachers, and counselors. The Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines two major components of CSR. First, CSR is a systematic approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating school-wide efforts that incorporate all aspects of a school, including instruction, management, and parent involvement. Second, CSR models suggest that successful implementation requires the active engagement of the school, community, youth, teachers and parents. This

principle stems from the theory that authentic community approaches to youth risk outcomes may have more sustainability than top-down approaches to school improvement.

Astor and Benbenishty's research in Israeli schools during the aftermath of the Second Nahariya War demonstrates the whole-school primary prevention approach. After the Second Nahariya War, teachers, principals, and other school stakeholders utilized a data-driven decision making procedure to monitor an array of student outcomes and to identify appropriate resilience interventions . This process enabled school professionals to actively engage students in building resilience and academic success, despite the trauma of war. As will be discussed later in the article, this approach was replicated for military-connected youth in civilian public schools.

Schools as Sanctuaries: The Importance of School Climate

When whole school primary prevention approaches are employed, schools can become sanctuaries for military-connected youth coping with abuse and neglect. A review of literature conducted by Thapa and colleagues have defined this phenomenon as school climate. School climate plays a powerful role in supporting all students in a school community, especially the most vulnerable groups. This research has found that a school's social and emotional climate has a buffering effect on a wide range of negative

outcomes that co-occur with abuse and neglect—poor mental health, violence, and substance use.

Jonathan Cohen and colleagues at the National School Climate Center have defined school climate as thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that signal social and emotional qualities of school life. A supportive and caring school climate occurs when students have caring relationships with school adults and peers, feel a genuine sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community, and feel physically and emotionally safe. A school's climate sets the tone for all teaching and learning done in the school environment. School leaders, teachers, school staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders in the school community must work together to consciously develop caring school communities.

Not only does school climate promote academic and technical skill building, but positive social and emotional skills that lead to resilience during stressful life circumstances (i.e. child maltreatment). A CASEL report stated that a nurturing, safe, and supportive school climate the ability of youth to be effective problem solvers, recognize the consequences of their actions, and learning how to care for one's personal health and well-being. In addition, students who have well-developed social and emotional skills know how to develop supportive social relationships with diverse peers. They are also caring individuals with concern and respect for others, develop good

character, make sound moral decisions, and behave in an ethical and responsible manner.

Military-Connected Students in Civilian Schools

Supportive and caring school environments can be sanctuaries for military-connected youth as they experience abuse and other deployment-related stressors. In a study of military youth in six school districts in southern California, my colleagues and I found that school connectedness and caring relationships with school adults moderated outcomes known to co-occur with abuse such as depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and bullying.

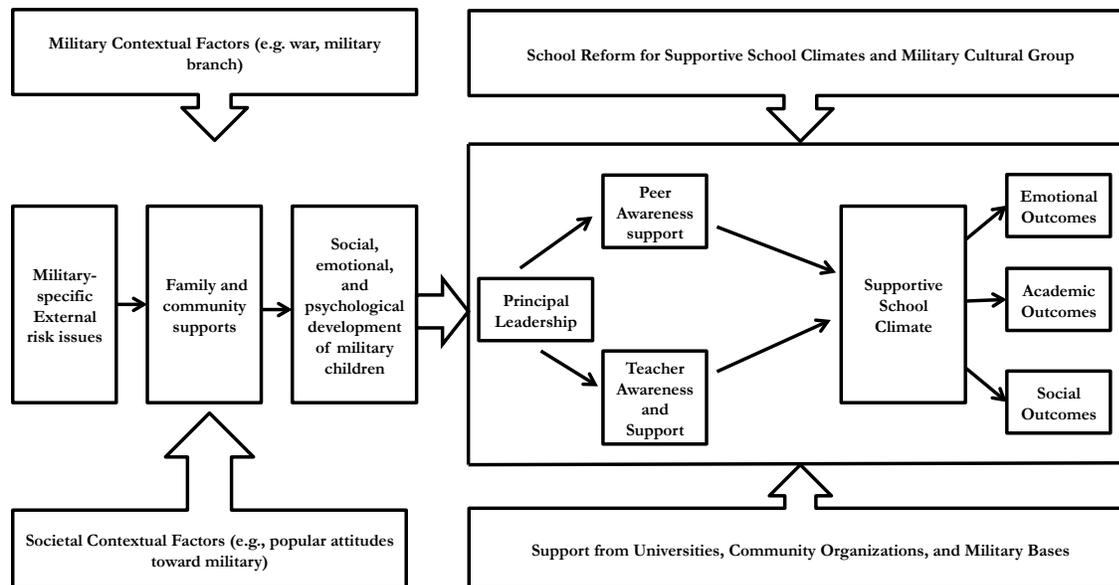
Unfortunately, civilian schools often lack social and emotional supports for military-connected youth. In civilian communities, schools staff and peers are unaware of military life events, and, as a result, may victimize military students. Mmari and her colleagues found that civilian students expressed anti-war sentiments by committing acts of violence against military adolescents. Bradshaw her research team found that as a result of multiple moves, military adolescents had difficulty adjusting to new school environments, including school and classroom rules and procedures. Civilian school environments often lack procedures to address multiple school transitions, such as meeting academic requirements and providing connections to social supports in the new community. Moreover, civilian schools often lack the capacity to support military families, as they navigate

resources in a new community. The resulting social isolation for military families and youth could exacerbate abuse, neglect, and negative co-occurring outcomes.

Building Supportive Schools for Military-Connected Youth

Since 2010, the USC research team, the Department of Defense Educational Activity, several military-connected school districts in southern California, and local community organizations have worked towards a whole school primary prevention approach that supports military-connected youth and families in times of stress (see <http://buildingcapacity.usc.edu>). The Building Capacity team found that surrounding contexts must work together to build the capacity of schools to support military-connected youth. As seen in the right hand side of Figure 1, the Building Capacity team developed a conceptual framework that connects research, practice, and policy for building school communities engaged in whole-school and primary prevention approaches for all military-connected youth.

Figure 1. Developing a Supportive School Environment



Funded \$7.6 million by the Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA), Building Capacity for Military-Connected Schools is a Consortium of eight military-connected school districts in the San Diego metropolitan area, the Department of Defense Educational Activity, the University of Southern California, Bar Ilan University, school liaison officers, military installations, numerous military-related non-profit organizations, and other universities (i.e. SDSU, UCSD, and UCLA). Led by Principal Investigator Dr. Ron Avi Astor of USC and co-PI Dr. Rami Benbenishty at Bar Ilan University, the overarching mission of Building Capacity is to create sustainable and replicable infrastructures and data-driven models of responsive and supportive schools. This process has empowered teachers, principals and other school staff to use

In a span of four years, Building Capacity enacted four components of whole-school change to promote healthy development for military-connected youth. The first component focused on developing human capacity in schools. USC School of Social Work partnered with the Military Child Education Coalition to provide professional development to school professionals. Teachers and school leaders, for instance, learned about classroom accommodations and school programs for military-connected youth. In addition, the USC Master of Social Work and SDSU School of Education School Counseling programs coordinated the placement of social work and counseling interns in schools throughout the Consortium. Collectively, they provided over 55,000 contact hours with students and school staff. For four years, interns provided individual counseling, created groups and clubs for military students to support them during times of deployment, and organized school events like the Marine's Birthday celebration to honor the sacrifices of military families.

A second critical component was the development of the military-connected module within the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), the largest statewide survey of elementary, middle, and high school students' perceptions of school climate, resiliency, and risk behaviors in the United States. USC researchers and the California Department of Education (CDE) partnered to create and administer the military-connected module. The module includes a military identifier that asks students if they have a

military parent, sibling, and other family members in the military. Other items ask students to report the number of family deployments in the past ten years, number of school transitions, and perceptions of school support. The USC research team also executed a feedback loop system for schools. Key stakeholders, including school leaders, complete biannual surveys to report how their needs for supporting military-connected youth, assess programs, and student support groups.

Using Data to Create Supportive Schools for Military-Connected Youth

The two sources of data empowered schools to be supportive spheres for military-connected youth. The USC research team and social work interns worked with school leaders and teachers to interpret school-level data from the CHKS and biannual surveys. Schools routinely used data to monitor their needs for supporting military-connected youth, their outcomes, and generate school-based programs. For instance, one school district identified major academic issues among military-connected youth. As a result, the school district in partnership with the USC research team with the nearby UCSD College of Educational Studies. A team of UCSD undergraduate tutors in the Partners at Learning service learning program were trained in working with military-connected youth and provided more than 550 hours of academic tutoring to military-connected students. A nearby school district developed Learning Together, a peer to peer tutoring program, after observing academic needs among military-connected youth. This peer teaching

program pairs school-age tutors and tutees one-on-one for a collaborative learning experience, where both tutors and tutees develop relationships through learning.

All of the participating school districts identified the need for resilience building among military-connected youth experiencing the stress of deployment. In response, the USC research team partnered with UCLA researchers who developed the Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS). FOCUS was developed for use in a clinical setting, however, the UCLA research team created a school-based version of FOCUS. The FOCUS School-Based Skill-Building Groups (SBGs) consist of nine sessions and provide training in all five FOCUS core skills (i.e., Emotional Regulation, Communication, Goal-Setting, Problem Solving, and Managing Deployment and Loss Reminders) in a flexible manner that accommodates differences related to service branch, setting logistics, and participant demographics. DoDEA funded the training of MSW interns in FOCUS and subsequent use in the Consortium schools. To address issues of bullying, a school district developed and implemented Because Nice Matters, a bullying intervention program. Because Nice Matters is a district-wide anti-bullying program encourages and recognizes kind behavior and involves symbolic activities, such as wearing purple and black to remind everyone that bullying can cause physical and psychological damage.

The USC research team has also helped to create awareness of military family issues for school professionals nationally. For instance, Building Capacity developed four guidebooks published through Teachers College Press for school administrators, teachers, pupil personnel, and parents, so that they have the tools to create military-friendly schools. In addition, Building Capacity worked with Command Media, a nonprofit organization that teaches wounded warriors how to create short documentaries. They developed a library of videos demonstrating the practices that are described and encouraged in the guidebooks.

Addressing the Stress of School Transitions

Currently, universities, schools, and community organizations are working together to address a key stressor that may precede child abuse and neglect in military families—school transitions. In 2013, DoDEA funded \$4.9 million to Welcoming Practices, a consortium of five school districts and USC to support military-connected youth and families in school transitions. Five school districts with approximately 110 schools partnering with USC plan to comprehensively address the transition needs of military students. The Consortium is currently developing a suite of electronic applications to support transitions. This suite of PC, iPad, ePad and smartphone applications will ensure that students and parents are informed of all required documentation and relevant eligibility criteria even before they arrive to the district, link them with school, district and community social supports, and

provide reminders of referrals and appointments. Each district is organizing transition teams and resource centers to coordinate the transition process.

Conclusion

The current school responses of referral and clinical interventions do not address deployment stress, school transitions, and other military life events that may drive abuse and neglect and co-occurring outcomes. The Building Capacity and Welcoming Practices Consortia are examples of how schools can support military-connected youth build resilience and feel supported in the face of stressful military life events.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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