

Operation: Military Kids



Ohio National Guard Maj. Gen. Deborah Ashenhurst meets with a camp counselor at Camp Kelleys Island. The camp, which serves children of deployed National Guard, Reserve and active duty service members, is a partnership of Ohio 4-H and the National Guard.

Reaching out to Ohio's military youth

Dr. Theresa M. Ferrari, state 4-H military liaison

It's 2006. **Danielle** is 9 years old. Her mom and dad sit her and her younger brother down one day and break the news: Her dad is going to be leaving. He's just received notice that his National Guard unit will be going to Iraq and he'll be leaving soon — for a year.

Danielle is not really sure what that means at first. She didn't

mind too much when he went away for two weeks for Army training; he wasn't gone that long and it was during summer. But later she wonders who is going to help her with her math homework and take her to soccer practice. And what about her birthday and Christmas? What's it going to be like without dad there? She gets pretty sad thinking about it and doesn't know what to do.

Are there military kids like Danielle in your school district? With only one active duty military installation in the state, unless you live near Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in southwest Ohio, you might think the answer is “no.” However, in addition to active duty service members, there are significant numbers of National Guard and Reserve troops in Ohio. These citizen soldiers live in our communities and also serve part time in the military.

According to the Department of Defense, there are nearly 33,000 military youth in Ohio. Since these children are spread across every county in the state, they often do not have close access to the services and military family support available at a military installation.

We don’t have to look far for military kids — they’re in our backyard. Approximately two-thirds of the military youth in Ohio are school age, so chances are there is a “Danielle” or “Daniel” in every school district in the state. Since Sept. 11, 2001, thousands of military youth have experienced a parent’s deployment; many have experienced it multiple times.

Let’s take a look at what’s it like to be a military kid and how schools can address the unique needs of these students.

Life as a military kid

On the one hand, military kids are like any other kid. They have the same needs as all young people. But being part of a military family adds an extra layer to their life. There have always been military kids, but troop deployments from the National Guard and Reserves associated with the Global War on Terrorism after 9/11 created a population of “suddenly military” youth with unique needs, like Danielle.

When a parent is deployed, youth may experience changes to family routines — like help with math homework and rides to soccer practice. They also might face disruptions to special events such as birthdays and holidays. The separation may create greater anxiety, stress, emotional difficulties, behavior issues and problems at school.

Children may feel isolated because they don’t know anyone else in the same situation, and they feel others don’t understand what they’re going through. Adolescents may have more responsibilities at home, such as caring for younger siblings. They worry not only about the deployed parent, but the parent who remains at home.

The at-home parent experiences greater stress from worrying about the service member’s safety, as well as from shouldering increased home responsibilities and dealing with difficulties their children may be having. Greater anxiety and depression also have been reported. This is significant because research shows that outcomes for youth are dependent on their parents’ ability to deal with the challenges and stresses of deployment and military life.

When a service member returns from deployment, there’s typically a “honeymoon” period when the family is glad to be reunited. But, life may never return to the way it was before the service member’s departure. The family must figure out a way to go forward with a “new normal.” The challenges of reintegration can continue long after the service member comes home.

The new normal is not always negative, however. Change brought on by deployment can encourage independence, flexibility and adaptability. It can strengthen family bonds, create new friendships and open up new opportunities.

Operation: Military Kids

In response to the needs of military families, Operation: Military Kids (OMK) was started in 2004 by 4-H National Headquarters and Army Child, Youth and School Services as a pilot program in five states. Ohio was asked to join when the initiative expanded in 2005. To reach the target audience of military youth, Ohio 4-H joined forces with the Ohio National Guard. The resulting partnership has been integral to the program’s success. Although funding is provided through the U.S. Army, OMK programs are available to all branches of service. OMK is based at The Ohio State University in the Ohio 4-H Youth Development program.



A military member’s daughter leaps over hurdles at Camp Kelleys Island. In the background are Ohio State University athletes who joined the military kids at the camp.

The mission of Operation: Military Kids is to support deployed National Guard, Reserve and active duty service members' children living in communities across the country by:

- raising community understanding about how the deployment of a family member affects military youth, families, service members and the community as a whole;
- building community capacity and creating local support networks;
- implementing a wide range of recreational, social and educational programs for military youth living in civilian communities.

Using a variety of strategies, OMK programs aim to develop resilient youth who can cope with stress and thrive in the face of challenges. OMK works with community partners to enhance efforts to support military youth. Initiatives to raise community understanding about how deployment of a family member affects military youth include outreach to educators and events during Month of the Military Child in April.

Donations and in-kind contributions from many community organizations, businesses and individuals have made program expansion possible. Operation: Military Kids is always looking to develop new partnerships around the state — including partnerships with schools — to reach an even wider audience.



These two teenagers became fast friends during their stay at Camp Kelleys Island. Making friends with other military kids and sharing experiences is what the camp is all about.

Camp on!

Fast forward to 2013 and Danielle is now 16 years old. She just got back from summer camp, which she's been going to for a week every summer since she was 9. She is a counselor-in-training this year. Along with two co-counselors, she is a leader of her own cabin of 9-year-olds. It was something she had looked forward to for several years.

Like her, all of the campers were from military families. So when the nighttime cabin conversation turned to a camper whose dad was in Afghanistan, Danielle was able to relate

to what she was going through and say "I've been there too," followed by, "Hey, what was the best part of today? You can write your dad a postcard and tell him about camp. My dad really liked it when I sent him letters when he was in Iraq."

Residential camping was selected as a way to reach military youth like Danielle because of Ohio 4-H's expertise in providing outstanding outdoor programs. The National Guard markets the camp to service members and provides program management expertise. The first Ohio OMK camp was held at the Erie County 4-H Camp on Kelleys Island in 2005. There were 81 campers ages 9 to 14, 16 camp counselors and eight

What they say about Ohio Operation: Military Kids camp

What kids say

"When I found out my dad was going to be deployed I was devastated; I didn't know where to go or what to do. Then I found this camp."

— Camper reflecting on his deployment experience

What camp counselors say

"As a military kid myself, it feels great to be able to help other kids going through what I went through as a child."

— Teen camp counselor

"I feel like those nine little girls changed my life forever. OMK is life-altering and there is just something about the friendships you make there that is unlike any other place in this world ... thank you so much for making this my favorite place on earth."

— Seven-year camper after her first year as a counselor

What parents say

"Our boys have learned and experienced so much at camp and we love what they come home to share with us. After three yearlong deployments within seven years, we know we've got grit!"

— Army National Guard spouse, parent of two teens

"My children are better off for having this opportunity. They're more well rounded, resilient, open-minded and accepting of the military lifestyle. I know for my children, it's made a world of difference."

— Army National Guard service member, parent of three

"This camp gave them a few days to forget all the worries of being a kid whose daddy is deployed."

— Army National Guard spouse, parent of two

"Thank you to all of the great staff that made my son's first year at camp awesome! He's beside himself wishing he was back at camp right now. Thank you for creating memories that he will carry for a long time."

— Air National Guard service member, parent of a 10-year-old

adult staff and volunteers.

The camp expanded to five days in 2006 and enrollment steadily grew. When additional funding for camps became available from the Office of the Secretary of Defense in 2009, Camp Kelleys Island expanded to a second site, Camp Patmos, a mile down the road. This camp now accommodates 260 campers and involves approximately 70-75 counselors and 45-50 adult staff each year who fulfill a variety of management, program and health and wellness functions.

The program includes the typical aspects of any summer camp, such as canoeing, crafts and campfires. The unique aspect is an infusion of military culture made possible by service members embedded as part of the staff and visits from military leaders. Camp counselors were initially recruited from the ranks of experienced 4-H counselors. With time, military youth began to take on this leadership role as they reached the camper age limit. Today, approximately half of the counselors are military youth.

The camps were so successful that one-day Hero Camps were added in 2008 and Troop and Family Camps in 2009. In 2013, OMK organized or supported 17 camp opportunities for military youth and families.

Camp has been called the experience of a lifetime, and it is easy to see why. After filtering through all the feedback from participants over the past years, the one thing that stands out is *relationships*. Parents and children alike state that the opportunity to meet others who share the experience of being in a military family is what they like best. At family camps, an added benefit is strengthening relationships within the family. To parents, time together is hard to come by in a fast-paced world, so spending quality time as a family is priceless.

Resources

- Troop and Family Assistance Centers (TFAC): www.homefront.ohio.gov/contact.aspx
- Staying Strong: How Schools Build Resilience in Military Families: <http://vimeo.com/47942649>
- Online tutoring 24/7: www.tutor.com
- Student Online Achievement Resource (SOAR): www.soarathome.org
- March2Success: www.march2success.com
- Our Military Kids: www.ourmilitarykids.org
- Boys & Girls Clubs of America: www.bgca.org/military
- Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC): www.militarychild.org
- Military Interstate Compact Agreement: www.mic3.net

Danielle isn't an actual person, but her story is representative of the experience of military youth. Hundreds of Danielles and Daniels have participated in Operation: Military Kids programs since 2005. The need still exists to reach all of the military youth in our backyard.

To learn more about Ohio OMK, visit www.ohio4h.org/operation-military-kids or contact the author at (614) 247-8164 or ferrari.8@osu.edu; **Katie Feldhues**, program manager, Ohio Operation: Military Kids at (614) 292-3758 feldhues.2@osu.edu; or **Len Klakulak**, education outreach specialist, Ohio National Guard at (989) 289-1893 or leonard.r.klakulak.ctr@army.mil. ■

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