



YOUR GUIDE TO  
WORKING WITH

# MILITARY- CONNECTED

CHILDREN AND YOUTH




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The Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are committed to supporting the military family community, which contributes directly to the CAF's operational readiness and effectiveness.

# INTRODUCTION

Communities lie at the heart of supporting modern military families effectively. No single organization, centre, or provider has the mandate, resources, geographic reach, or knowledge necessary to provide comprehensive, definitive support. A greater community understanding of the military family experience can enhance skills to better serve military families and strengthen the network of family support.

This guide is for the adults who may be in a position to offer support. Camp leaders, coaches, health care providers, youth group organizers, recreation workers, church leaders, early childhood educators, social workers, program coordinators, professional therapists, and other trusted adults can all play a big role in the lives and the well-being of military-connected children and youth. Understanding some of the facts of Canadian military family life can help the civilian community to welcome them and to make sure that they get the support they need to thrive.

The children of Canada's military families live in communities across the country and on bases around the world. Like all children, they participate in a wide range of activities, from sports to summer camps, and they rely on supports ranging from child care to health and wellness services. In the course of their day-to-day lives, military-connected children and youth come into contact with, and are supported by, many community service providers and organizations.

This resource was created for you by Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, in partnership with Kids Help Phone, Canada's only 24/7, national support service, to support your work in the community with military children and youth. It is a tool for any service provider who has ever wondered what Canadian military life is like and what it has to do with the kids you come into contact with. More information, including additional resources, references for this guide, and links to our morale and welfare service delivery agents in your communities, can be found at [cfmws.ca](https://cfmws.ca).



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# MILITARY LITERACY MATTERS

Military literacy: Awareness of the unique experiences of military families and the life stressors that affect them, such as frequent moves, separations from family, and the risk of the profession of arms.



## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN & YOUTH?

Part of working with children and youth means building a relationship of trust and respect, and that connection requires an honest appreciation of each child's unique circumstances and life history. By gaining an understanding of the military lifestyle, service providers can help military-connected children and youth develop ways to cope and manage the pressures from disruptions such as frequent moves and separations from a parent.

**Military literacy** can help you appreciate their strengths and challenges, and help you to lessen the stressors related to the military lifestyle. When military-connected children and youth and families are strong and healthy, Canada's military personnel can better do their job of protecting Canada and Canadian interests and values, while contributing to international peace and security.

# WHO ARE CANADA'S MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN & YOUTH?

## MYTH

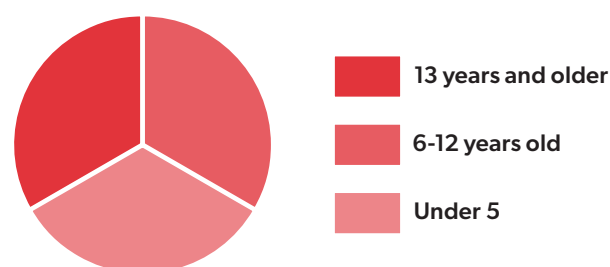
*Military families live on bases.*

## FACT

*Today, approximately 15% of military families live in military housing.*

Canada's military-connected children and youth are spread out fairly evenly across three age groups:

## Military-Connected Children and Youth in Canada



**At least 15% of these military-connected children and youth have both parents serving.**

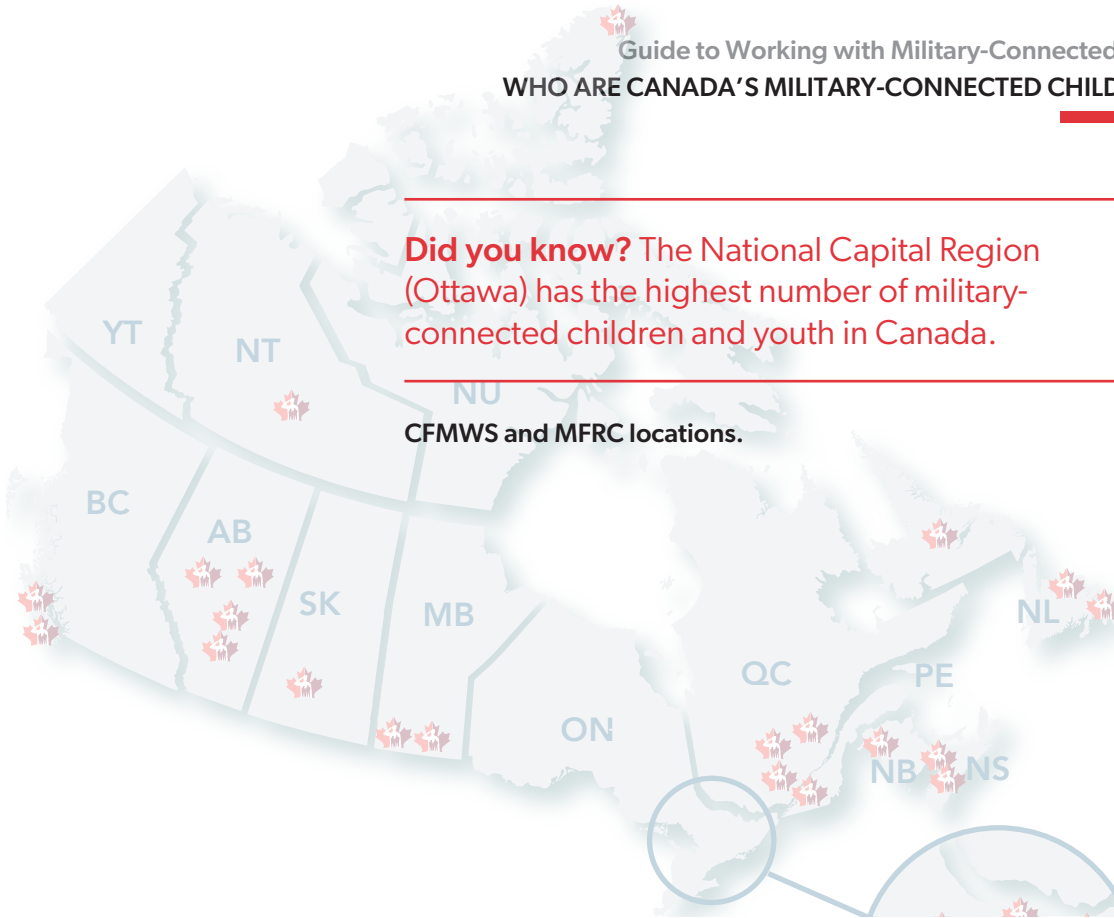
In the past, a lot of military families lived on Canadian Armed Forces bases. As recently as the 1980s, half of military families in Canada lived side-by-side other military families in base housing. Things have changed. The majority (85%) of military families live off-base in neighbourhoods across the country spanning all socioeconomic classes.

Some military families live in towns close to military bases. However, contrary to public perception, many families are spread out in areas not recognized as military communities. Large numbers live in big urban centres like Halifax, Edmonton, and Ottawa. While there are some regions with high military populations, most of Canada's military families live in places where they are the minority.

\* Unless otherwise noted, all demographic data from:  
Manser, L. (2018). *Profile of Military Families in Canada: 2017 Regular Force Demographics*. Ottawa: Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services.  
Manser, L. (2018). *State of Military Families in Canada: Issues Facing Regular Force Members and Their Families*. Ottawa: Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services.

**Did you know?** The National Capital Region (Ottawa) has the highest number of military-connected children and youth in Canada.

CFMWS and MFRC locations.



### What does this mean?

Military families move often, and living off-base offers both challenges and opportunities for families as they try to fit into new civilian communities every few years. In the past, families often relied on close-knit military communities; now, they may know very few other families in the military community. Being spread out from one another can create a disconnect from the military community and a sense of isolation. It's not always easy for a military family to fully integrate into the local community when relocations can happen every three to four years. Most of their civilian neighbours may not know much about the military lifestyle, why one parent is away for months at a time, or how a military family may not have family or social support networks to call upon for child care or during emergencies. In addition, these families do not always know about all of the services and programs available

to them when separated from the morale and welfare services (including their local Military Family Resource Centre), at their local Base or Wing. However, CFMWS and MFRCs are offering virtual programming to close the gap so that families can access services where they are.

For the 15% of military families who still live on bases across Canada, there are the benefits of access to MFRCs offering military-literate programs and services (i.e. child care, mental health services, and employment support) and a sense of community with other military families. However, the military base culture can be a source of isolation as families live apart from civilian communities. Increasingly, since MFRCs do not duplicate community services, families are referred to the community and with time, become comfortable using both military and civilian services.

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GROW UP IN A MILITARY FAMILY?

Outside of the military, few jobs expose people to frequent moves, separations from family, and high levels of risk throughout their careers. Repeated relocation, absences of one or both parents, parental deployments to volatile areas, and unpredictable work hours are sources of stress for military families and this can affect their well-being.

Beyond the emotional impact of these circumstances, practical issues such as finding health care, child care, and employment, continuing schooling, and ensuring smooth transitions during moves can be a struggle for military families.

Despite their overall health and resilience, surveys and studies have shown that the military lifestyle can have an impact on the well-being of Canada's military-connected children and youth. Common stressors include problems with school and friends, anxiety, and a general sense of not being well understood by other children and trusted adults.

Three characteristics shape the lifestyle of military families in Canada. These impact the vast majority of children in military families and are central to military family life.

## **Frequent Relocation**

Military families are required to geographically relocate on a recurring basis. These relocations occur at the discretion of the CAF in response to its organizational and operational needs.

## **Parental Absences**

As with postings from one region to another, CAF members are required to be away from their families frequently throughout much of their careers. These separations can last from a single day up to 15 months at a time.

## **Risk**

The notion of risk, including the possibility of permanent injury, illness or even death, is accepted as a central tenet of the profession of arms.

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**While many jobs may place one or two of these pressures on families, the military is unique in the way it combines all three elements, with the added weight of unpredictability and a lack of choice or control.**

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“Even though we moved several times during my childhood, I always felt connected as the military is a “small world” and family unit. Everywhere we moved, there were always familiar faces and we were welcomed with open arms by the Wing.”

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# FREQUENT RELOCATION

## MYTH

*Military families do not move around like they used to.*

## FACT

*Each year there are on average 15,000 relocations for CAF members and their families.*

**One significant characteristic of the military lifestyle is the fact that military families move a lot.**

In any given year, one in four Regular Force families will have to relocate to a new base or wing (an Air Force base). In a 2016 survey of CAF military spouses, over half had relocated one to three times due to postings, while just over 20% had relocated four or more times.

What is a POSTING?

Canadian Armed Forces members are expected to move often so they can get a wide range of training and experience. A posting is the rotation of military members into new positions across the country and, in some cases, to other countries. Postings can last from a few months to several years, depending on the member's job, skills, and experience.

In a 2016 study, some Canadian military-connected children and youth expressed that relocation can be positive when it leads to experiencing new people and cultures, and getting the chance to see places not many other children and youth have the opportunity to see. Certain children find travel exciting and appreciate that the family gets to be together. But, while moving often can offer military-connected children and youth the chance to learn and grow personally, it can also disrupt their education, break social bonds, and lead to the possibility of experiencing mental health challenges.

It's important to understand the many different ways that frequent moves can affect the life of military-connected children and youth.

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*"Having a mom in the military has allowed me to live in three different provinces in Canada. Making friends at each new school is never easy, but my sister and I have been pretty good at fitting into new communities. Sometimes I wish we could stay in one neighbourhood longer, but at the same time I consider myself lucky to have seen so many parts of the country."*

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## CHILD CARE

Early learning and child care programs are essential to promote equity. These programs can support families with low income, single parent households, and families with children with special needs. Access to early learning and child care provides children with equitable starting conditions and healthy developmental trajectories, which military lifestyle challenges can often disrupt (e.g., frequent relocations, irregular work hours and extended separation from parents).

In most military families, both parents work outside the home. Unfortunately, frequent relocation can make it hard to set up regular child care. Military families are often placed on the bottom of waitlists with every move. Where child care exists, it is usually designed for families who work regular workdays which cannot always meet the needs of military families. For single parent and/or dual-service military families, finding reliable child care is even more difficult.

While finding good child care is a struggle for a lot of Canadian families, the vast majority of military families may not have friends, family or support systems nearby to turn to for help. Challenges accessing child care can affect the well-being of children and make it hard for spouses to work outside the home.

Research suggests that while a parent is deployed, children experience decreased well-being, changes to their sleep patterns and changes to academic performance. However, seeking support from teachers and peers benefits children and promotes their resilience while their parent is deployed. This demonstrates the significant importance of early learning and child care programs in supporting the well-being of CAF families by providing a stable and nurturing environment for children while their parents are on duty serving our nation.

### MYTH

*Military-connected children and youth have their own schools.*

### FACT

*Military-connected children and youth go to the same schools as other Canadians.*

## EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE (ELCC) PROFESSIONALS

ELCC professionals play a crucial role as a valuable resource for military and veteran families adapting to new child care programs. When ELCC professionals understand the military lifestyle, they can better support military-connected children, recognizing their unique perspectives and experiences.

When collaborating openly with families, ELCC professionals can provide guidance and support to help children and families navigate and adapt to their new circumstances. They actively facilitate the adjustment process by establishing relationships with the child and the family, fostering connections with other children in the program. Peer connections among military-connected children, who share similar challenges like relocation and parental absence, help normalize difficult feelings.

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ELCC professionals can provide a flexible and secure environment that helps children develop adaptation and resiliency skills. This is beneficial especially during parental absences and family relocations as they can often lead to behavior changes in military-connected children. Understanding the Emotional Cycle of Deployment can help you to best support children through what can be a difficult time.

ELCC professionals should encourage parents to keep all child care staff informed about upcoming changes, allowing them to observe and initiate preventative strategies for successful transitions. A supportive relationship between ELCC professionals and military families is crucial for a child's well-being and promotes healthy child development.

There are also resources and tools available for military-connected children. Using military related storybooks and activities provides an opportunity to support military-connected children with empathy and understanding as they navigate the emotions surrounding the challenges with the military lifestyle including parental separation, deployment, and relocation.

## SCHOOL

Military families rely on the same community resources, such as schools, social organizations, and hospitals, as civilian families. It is true that military-connected children and youth once went to their own schools called DND Dependants' Schools. Today, military-connected children and youth attend schools alongside their civilian peers. Families posted overseas can send their children to schools run by Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS).

Military-connected children and youth must continually adapt to new school programs depending on the province or country of their posting. Differences in curriculum,

testing, credit transfers, graduation requirements, and language of instruction between provinces and school districts are a few of the challenges that military families face when moving to a new school.

In some cases, students will find themselves ahead of their classmates, having already covered material in a previous school. This can lead to boredom and a loss of interest in school. Other times, children and youth coming from a different system may not be prepared and will need extra help to catch up to their classmates. Being behind can be very hard for young people both academically and socially.

Individualized programming, pathway planning or tutoring, offered either through the school or **Military Family Services Education Team**, can assist in most of these cases.

Language and cultural expectations can also make it tough for young people to transition to a new school. For example, frequent moves, sometimes overseas, can make it impossible to have a bilingual education. Sometimes, military-connected children and youth are sent to boarding school in Canada or in a neighbouring country when their military parent is posted internationally. This can be a positive experience, but it can also be emotionally stressful for the young person and the whole family.

Moving can be particularly difficult during the teenage years as youth get closer to high school graduation and are looking at their post-secondary options. Graduation requirements vary across provinces, and some youth end up having to do distance learning or complete an additional school year in order to graduate. University and college admission requirements such as classes and residency also vary by institution, and it's hard to make a plan for your education when you cannot be sure where you or your family will be living in the coming years.

It is no surprise that in a Canadian study of military-connected children and youth, older children worried more about the challenges of schoolwork that came with moving than younger children did. High school demands more studying and homework, and differences in school backgrounds play a greater role in grades as children mature.

## EDUCATORS

Educators have an important role in the lives of CAF families. Inclusive school environments and flexibility during transitions are beneficial and essential aspects of supporting military-connected students. Educators and education professionals are encouraged to increase their awareness of the unique stressors faced by military-connected children and youth.

When that new school year starts and you have all those new faces sitting in front of you, we recognize that it's not easy to identify which of those students may be in a military family. However, we know that educators are particularly adept at learning about their students through questioning, activities, or interacting with parents. You quickly learn who your students are. Once you've identified those military-connected children and their families, it is our hope that a better understanding of the resources available to Canadian Armed Forces families will allow you to feel better prepared to support their unique needs throughout their time in your school.

Military-connected children and youth benefit from both peers and trusted adults understanding their unique lifestyle. Educators can incorporate military contexts into group activities, allowing children and youth to share experiences either openly or privately. Addressing topics like relocation and parental separation fosters a sense of safety and belonging. Educators should monitor for changes in behavior and academic performance, especially among military-connected children and youth, who may be at

higher risk of psychological distress. Flexibility of due dates and extracurricular activities can mitigate the challenges of frequent moves, ensuring these children and youth can fully participate.

## SPORTS AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR PARTICIPATION

For newly-posted children and youth, getting involved in community activities can be very positive, but it doesn't always come without a struggle. When a child grows up in one community, they learn about sport opportunities, timetables, and expectations as a matter of course from

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**"Our son has played competitive tackle football for a number of years in Alberta. When our family was posted to Québec, the try-outs for the local football team had already taken place. As a result, he was forced to sit out an entire season."**

**– A military spouse**

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their friends, neighbours, and school. Social organizations, creative opportunities, and local activities are a part of the language of the neighbourhood. Signups, training, tryouts, practice, and class registration follow a certain rhythm during the year, and local children find their favourite activities and can participate fully.

Through its recreation departments, CFMWS develops leisure programs that are more flexible and meet the needs of military families. Try-outs for example can happen throughout the year, and day-camp programs registrations are open longer to ensure new families posted in have opportunities to participate.

With the help of parents and understanding community service providers, most children and youth will find their way into the fabric of the community. Still, when disruptions occur every few years, the disadvantages can pile up. It may be very difficult for military-connected

## FREQUENT RELOCATION

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children and youth to pursue an athletic or artistic passion without the continuity of involvement that living in one place allows.

### FRIENDSHIPS

Children from military families often identify moving as one of their main stressors associated with the military family lifestyle.

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**“There’s nothing worse than leaving my friends.”**

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Connectedness is a basic human need; everyone has the need to feel they belong to something or someone and that they matter.

Connecting with others helps build identity, meaning, and purpose in one’s life and is linked to positive adjustment. Belonging takes on greater importance as children and youth get older. At the same time, as children pass through puberty, friendships become more complex and difficult to negotiate. Adolescents spend about 1/3 of their waking time with friends and face increased pressure to create and maintain friendships. Events that disrupt connections with others or interfere with forming new connections, such as moving to a new school or community, can lead to feelings of loneliness. In general, adolescents are more prone to loneliness than any other age group. Unfortunately, teenagers are not as able to cope with loneliness as older adults, who often learn to rely on reflection and acceptance. Young people are more likely to isolate.

Coupled with loneliness is the grieving process that can go along with losing close friendships. Grieving is a personal process experienced differently by each person. Some people feel overwhelming sadness while others feel a mix of conflicting emotions including numbness. Grief can creep up and hit like a “wave,” or it may be felt in “chunks” with periods of respite in between. This can be a lot for any child to go through, and for many military children, it is something they must experience again and again.

A recent study showed that children from military families in Canada saw the main stressors of moving as the pain of losing friends and the fear of not finding new ones. For most children and youth, the hardest times were the transition phases, when they were leaving their old home and had not yet settled into a new community or group of friends. They worried about being excluded or bullied even before arriving at a new school. The older they were, the harder these children and youth found the constant moving required by the military. This study confirmed that the role of friends in children and youth’s lives gained importance as they grew older. These children coped with the loss of friendships in different ways. Some found it helpful to keep in touch with their friends from their old posting, and to remind themselves that other military-connected children and youth were going through the same thing. Notably, some children and youth mentioned how Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services support structures, such as mentoring groups or summer camps just for military-connected children and youth, were helpful.

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**“As I got older, I found it got harder and more stressful.”**

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**“There’s one question I always have a hard time answering: ‘Where are you from?’”**

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As with all children and youth, those who found making friends generally difficult struggled the most with relocation. On the other hand, the more extroverted and experienced children were, the less intimidating they found relocation. In general, the children showed a high degree of resilience in their longer-term reactions to frequent moving.



## FREQUENT RELOCATION

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### HOW TO HELP

Trusted adults in the community can help military-connected children and youth new to their area by recognizing the impact of relocation and becoming actively involved in the child's integration.

#### Flexibility

In terms of school and extra-curricular activities, take into consideration the effect of frequent moves on continuity and experience. For example, military-connected children and youth may arrive after peak times for team tryouts or for signing up for camps, classes or other extracurricular activities. They may not have had the opportunity to take the same classes as other children due to frequent relocation or living abroad. Try to be flexible to allow military youth to participate in the full athletic and social fabric of your community.

#### Engagement

As much as possible, engage individually with newly-arriving children and encourage and facilitate their participation in community life and activities. There may be ways to give extra support in specific situations, such as assigning a mentor or helper in a group setting to show a new kid "the ropes" and introduce them to their new peers. In large community programs, there may be opportunities to create small support groups for military-connected children and youth. Such groups can provide a sense of safety and belonging.

Once familiar with their environment, and given the opportunity to experience the same possibilities as civilian children in all aspects of school and social life, most military-connected children and youth will adapt and thrive.

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"On the first day of school last year, the teacher matched me up with another kid in my class who had been new the year before. She was in charge of showing me where everything was and how it all worked. That really helped because she knew how it felt to be the new kid in school."

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#### Awareness and intervention

For the small percentage of military-connected children and youth who are seriously struggling, one step is to simply understand that frequent relocation can have an effect on a child's behaviour. Moving can cause gaps and disruptions in education, as well as cultural unawareness and social isolation, that could contribute to situations that superficially appear to be bullying. Investigate with the student (and family, if appropriate) any history of similar occurrences and work together to fill the gaps. Try to work with parents or other community workers to assess each child in a supportive, friendly manner and find the best route to success.

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"My dad is in the Air Force, and I spent most of my elementary school years in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. When we moved to Toronto, I found it really hard to fit in. Everything was so big and busy, and my new high school had hundreds of children and youth in each grade. I eventually made friends, but it was not easy. There were days I felt invisible."

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### Hard-to-reach children and youth

For lonely children and youth, sometimes just having a kind and soothing presence with them can make their feelings more bearable. The comfort and warmth of another person can help them to accept themselves and their emotions. In working with children who are new to a community and struggling with loneliness, it may be helpful to stress that it is normal to have these feelings and to talk about strategies to help them adjust to their new surroundings and connect with others. If a child has become unwilling to open themselves up to others and be known, you may be able to help them to see the costs of holding back in relationships and the benefits of taking a risk to put themselves a little more out there in friendships. You can remind them that we all need to belong and feel that we matter, and that there are many other people out there who are also searching for connection. Since it is “perceived” social support that protects against loneliness, it is worth reminding teenagers of possible sources of support they may have overlooked (e.g., family, church, sports, etc.) and encouraging them to reach out when needed.

Interestingly, research suggests that there are actually some benefits to spending a bit of time alone; there is a correlation between moderate solitary time and lower depression rates and higher grades. This may be because spending time by oneself creates opportunities for self-exploration, a key step in identity formation. In the short-term, spending time alone can actually lift mood and lead to attitude changes and lower self-consciousness. Privacy and alone time are important; however, taken too far, to the point of cutting off relationships, it could be a sign of depression.

Rebuilding a child’s social network and close friendships is still one of the most effective ways of coping with loneliness, as it leads to a sense of belonging and feeling loved and valued. Both new and old connections can offer social support. Research shows the experiences children have in recreation and sport at an early age carry a life-long impact. Positive experiences help children become capable, caring adults who contribute more effectively to the community in the future.

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“When we first moved, our daughter was constantly on the internet with her old friends. While this initially helped ease the emotional blow of leaving her friends, my husband and I grew concerned that this was preventing her from making friends in our new community. At the suggestion of a school counsellor, we limited her internet chat time and encouraged her to get involved in the school play. She loved the theatre program and made some really good friends.”

- A member of the Canadian Armed Forces

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## Tips for mental health practitioners

### When military-connected children and youth move into your community or join your program or practice:

- 
- ▶ Leave enough time to build a positive relationship with the military youth when you first meet with them.
- 
- ▶ Complete an intake history and check for signs of change from their baseline.
- 
- ▶ Consider strength-based small group sessions for youth of military families to help with transitions, supports, and making friends.
- 
- ▶ Consider which other local organizations and services could also be supportive.
- 

### When military-connected children and youth leave your community:

- 
- ▶ Provide records and referrals.
- 
- ▶ Where appropriate, obtain permission from the student (and family, depending on context) to share pertinent information with a new counsellor in the receiving community.
- 
- ▶ Direct them to the Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) and other local resources in their new community. A list of MFRCs and other CFMWS resources can be found on [cfmws.ca](http://cfmws.ca).
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# PARENTAL ABSENCES

## MYTH

*Canadian Armed Forces members aren't deployed as often as they used to be.*

## FACT

***On average, CAF members spend one quarter of their service time away from home on military-related duties. This is for a combination of courses, military exercises, and deployments.***

For most families, the longest periods of separation are due to **DEPLOYMENT**. By definition, a deployment is the assignment of military personnel to tours of duty away from the home location. Although the word commonly evokes visions of overseas missions, it can also refer to operations and exercises within Canada. These operations can vary; some military families may experience longer absences that are less frequent in nature, while others may have shorter absences that are more frequent. Some families experience plenty of both. In general, deployments are a difficult time in the life of a military child.

Military members do not have control over most of their periods of separation from their family; they are a condition of service in the military. The frequent absences of a military member are often unpredictable and open to change, and this uncertainty can have a profound impact on families. Frequent or extended time away can affect the health and well-being of every person in the military family, including children.

Frequent absences and deployments by the military member have always been a part of the military lifestyle, but, in some ways, the conditions of military family life have become more demanding in recent decades. One reason is that Canada's military has become more involved in multinational peacekeeping and humanitarian missions.

Military families are often expected to manage life without the presence of at least one parent. The increased danger of recent conflicts has also created additional stress for members and their families.

Being a member of the Canadian Armed Forces is a unique occupation that requires ongoing training to develop combat and combat support skills. This is a condition of service that takes the member away from their home and family for long periods of time. Separations from family can be for many reasons, including training, taskings, Temporary Duty (TD), Imposed Restriction (IR)\*, and deployment.

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\* See *Learning the lingo* section for definitions.



## DEPLOYMENT & ABSENCES: EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN & YOUTH

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The Canadian Armed Forces takes the well-being of its military families seriously. Efforts to understand the experiences of children and spouses have been ongoing for many decades. Experts have a pretty clear idea of the nature of “deployment stress” and some of the measures that can help children cope with it.

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### Children and youth experience parental absence in their own way.

While each military-connected child is unique, studies have shown that certain factors have a more noticeable impact than others on the way children handle a parent’s deployment. These have to do not only with the child, but with all of the other members of the family and the kind of deployment they are dealing with.

Research has shown that deployment stress is lower for children when there are **active coping strategies and social support networks** in place.

For various reasons, children are hardest hit by deployment’s **negative** effects when:

- ▶ **the military family is young and inexperienced**
- ▶ **the member is part of the Reserve Force**
- ▶ **the family is already experiencing stress and challenges**

## **FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH DEPLOYMENT STRESS**

### **INDIVIDUAL CHILD**

- ▶ age and emotional development, including ability to express feelings and cope with separation
- ▶ previous experience with parental absence/deployment
- ▶ sense of security in family and community relationships
- ▶ level of attachment to absent parent, how much time they spend together

### **DEPLOYED MEMBER**

- ▶ attitude of member toward assignment
- ▶ level of contact / interest / closeness with child during absence

### **REMAINING PARENT**

- ▶ attitude toward member's absence
- ▶ coping ability and well-being
- ▶ emotional support offered (i.e. attention, ability to listen, willingness to play, time to be together)

### **FAMILY**

- ▶ previous family separation experience
- ▶ efforts made to prepare child for absence, give information, and involve child in preparations
- ▶ couple stability and family harmony
- ▶ consistency of routines and rules

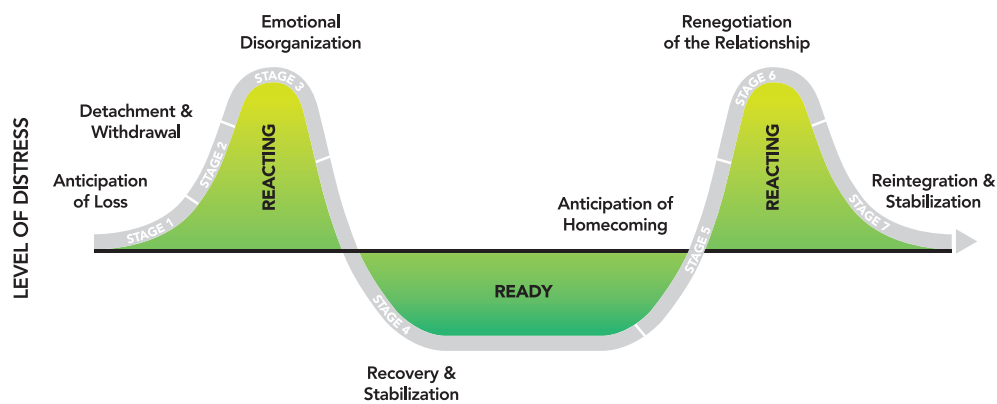
### **SITUATION**

- ▶ length of absence
- ▶ nature of mission (dangerous or not)
- ▶ geographical distance and ease of communication
- ▶ preparation time given to family

## THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT

### LONG-TERM DEPLOYMENTS

The emotional cycle of deployment is based on experience and research with military families who have been through a traditional long-term deployment. Families find reassurance in this model and its suggestions for coping, knowing that others often feel the same during this challenging time.



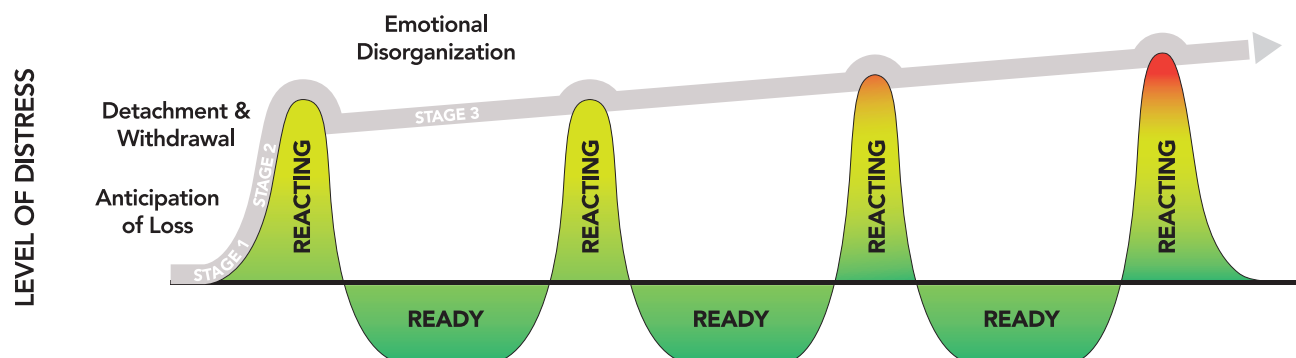
Source: Military Family Resource Centre Yellowknife

### SHORT-TERM DEPLOYMENTS

Many people don't realize that deployments (i.e., interval separations) that are shorter, but more frequent and less predictable, can be just as hard for a family. Repeated periods of separation and reunion can be even more difficult to manage because there is less time to readjust before the next absence.

Many families who experience frequent short-term separations and reunions talk about an ongoing feeling of emotional disorganization that makes it difficult to act and react.

These types of deployments require families to move through the stages more rapidly, without much time to adjust emotionally.



Source: Kathleen Vestal Logan

## PARENTAL ABSENCES

### THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT

No two people — even within the same family — will react to a parent's deployment in exactly the same way. However, there is almost always some reaction to the absence of their parent. This is normal. Understanding the different phases in the emotional cycle of deployment can help you to best support them through what can be a difficult time.

#### PRE-DEPLOYMENT

##### STAGE 1 - ANTICIPATION OF LOSS

Up to 6 weeks before a parent's departure, children and youth will start to experience the stage described as the **anticipation of loss**. Younger children and youth can feel confusion, surprise, guilt, and even anger at the leaving member, or it can sometimes be directed at the parent who will stay behind. This can come out as irritability, dependence, or other attention-seeking behaviour. Some children can even have sleep and appetite problems or other physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches.

During this time, young children who have difficulty understanding time can feel confused about what is happening. Older children will need time to adapt to the coming change. Children may ask questions of their parent such as, "Do you really have to go?" Some children (and other family members) may begin to put some emotional distance between themselves and the leaving parent in preparation for their absence. Children and youth can best cope during this stage when they are encouraged to feel and express all their emotional responses.

##### STAGE 2 - DETACHMENT AND WITHDRAWAL

In the final week before the member leaves, family members may go into a state of **detachment and withdrawal**. As the departure date gets closer, the member becomes focused on preparing for their mission and may start to distance themselves from family members. The family also begins distancing themselves and, in terms of day-to-day routines, may act like they are already gone.

As a result, communication can become strained. In some cases, arguments may increase as each person prepares to protect themselves from the hurt of separation.

For some people, this is the most difficult stage of the deployment cycle. Adults in the family can be going through intense feelings of despair and impatience, with the remaining parent often feeling angry or resentful, and the departing member feeling guilt and worry. When children sense their parents' stress, it is natural to act out. Reactions might include having more tantrums or showing regressive behaviours.

Again, open communication during this time is key to helping children and youth accept their feelings as normal reactions to challenging circumstances.

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"I was miserable at concentrating at school. I was miserable because he is risking his life and he could die."

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#### DURING DEPLOYMENT

##### STAGE 3 - EMOTIONAL DISORGANIZATION

Immediately after the member's departure, families may experience **emotional disorganization**. The absence of the member may leave the rest of the family confused for a time. Families talk about disturbances in their sleep and appetite, increased irritability, and an overall sense of being disorganized and indecisive. Some describe this as a period of restlessness.

In many families, when one parent is gone, routines change out of necessity and everyone has to take on added responsibilities. It is not uncommon for family members to feel overwhelmed and cycle through a range of feelings during this time. Children and youth can have feelings of sadness, abandonment, anxiety, confusion, and even reduced self-esteem. Sometimes, as children and youth are adjusting, they may be irritable or have trouble concentrating. These reactions are very normal and will likely settle down over time.

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“My childhood was not normal. I had to mature at a very young age to be able to support my mom and brother in the sadness and grief that was always in the house. Every time my father left it took a piece of me with him, I never knew if this was the last time I got to hug him, or be with him.”

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During this stage, it often helps to try and maintain routines as much as possible. While this isn’t always possible, keeping some familiarity through friendships and extra-curricular activities can be a comfort to children and youth. You can also encourage them to express their feelings and stay in touch with their absent parent through letters, photos, and cards.

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“When I was younger, I would use Dad’s shirt to go to bed.”

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“I met my best friend who had this doll with a picture on it. It’s a little stuffy doll. So I got one, and it’s easier sleeping because I put a picture of my Dad on it. It’s like he’s there.”

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### Coping with deployment

Deployment is stressful for families for lots of different reasons. In general, children and youth experience their parent’s departure with feelings of intense loss, no matter how supportive the remaining parent and trusted adults are. These feelings need to be understood and responded to.

In addition, when a military member deploys, the adult left behind has to deal with:

- ▶ increased workload at home
- ▶ stress about the member’s safety and the impact the deployment might have on the member
- ▶ worrying about the impact on their children
- ▶ making important decisions in the absence of their spouse/partner
- ▶ dealing with family emergencies, such as illnesses or accidents, alone

The deployed parent worries about these same things and can feel helpless as their families back home are dealing with these stresses on their own. Children and youth pick up on their parents’ worries and absorb some of their anxiety in addition to their own.

School-age children (approx. 6-12 years) are in a developmentally vulnerable place to have a parent deployed. Intellectually, they have the ability to reason and understand what is happening; however, there are still connections and details that they will try to figure out on their own. A mixed understanding of a military deployment can lead to confusion and fear. One example is when children watch the news and, often inappropriately, connect it to their own parent’s deployment, leading to increased fear.

Children of this age can also have contradictory feelings about their deployed parent, both sorrow and fear at their absence and anger at their leaving. For younger children, having one parent leave can trigger fears that the remaining parent will leave too. If the remaining parent is also struggling with some negative reactions, they may fear that their parents will separate. Some children and youth may even adopt an adult-like role to try to solve the situation.

## PARENTAL ABSENCES

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During this time of stress, children may show new behaviour problems, or existing ones may worsen. Some children seem to regress, while others go through mood swings, shifting from anger to neediness.

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*“During my first deployment, my son was going through a rough time at school. He was failing his math class, and despite my husband’s efforts to help him he didn’t pass his mid-term exams. While I could console my son during our weekly internet chats, I felt helpless not being there to help. The worst was when he confided to me that ‘sometimes I wish I had both parents around when things get tough.’” – Canadian Armed Forces Member*

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In general, teenagers are better able to understand the reason for and length of a parental deployment. Still, like younger children, adolescents can have a range of feelings including sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, and even depression, and their reactions can be harder for those around them to understand. Adolescents may express adult-like feelings while regressing developmentally in other ways. Some teens may withdraw from their families and become totally wrapped up in their friends. They may try to avoid the uncomfortable feelings at home, or even develop anger towards their remaining parent and siblings. While staying close to friends is important, it is also critical that a teenager’s activities and friendships be watched closely by trusted adults in their life.

The teen years are a vulnerable time to have a parent deployed. Without help, adolescents risk serious consequences from stress related to parental deployment, such as school problems, significant weight loss, or engaging in negative coping strategies such as self-harm, or drug or alcohol abuse. Sometimes, professional intervention may be necessary to help reduce the negative symptoms or behaviours they are showing.\*

## STAGE 4 - RECOVERY AND STABILIZATION

At a certain point during a long deployment, families start to settle into their new roles and responsibilities and find a way to manage while the member is away. Although the spouse/partner continues to worry and miss their loved one, the family finds a way to cope. At this point, families enter the **recovery and stabilization** stage.

There is usually a mix of positive and challenging responses for the whole family. Some children and youth find that they enjoy their newfound responsibilities and find a sense of independence and great relief that the family is okay. Others may continue to have difficulty accepting the new changes.

As a trusted adult in the child’s life, you can expect that there will be some slowdown of normal activities such as homework or training. Support them by listening and being willing to talk. There may be some outbursts from time-to-time, but children and youth should be supported to express their feelings in healthy and appropriate ways.

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND DEPLOYMENTS IN THE MEDIA AGE

Throughout a parent’s deployment, children soak up information from their day-to-day lives, from intentional conversations with their parents and supportive adults, as well as from inadvertent messages from peer and adult conversations, news reports, and images. In the case of deployments to volatile or high-profile conflict zones, no matter how much a parent may want to protect the child from news and images of the conflict, the child will probably absorb both inaccurate and accurate information about the event. Information can flow freely from social media, television, and other families in the member’s unit. Remind children not to jump to conclusions or to listen to rumors. If a child is concerned about something, encourage them to talk to family members directly to avoid any misunderstanding.

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\* See *“When Military-connected children and youth need professional help”* in this guide

## STAGE 5 - ANTICIPATION OF HOMECOMING

A few weeks before the member comes home, children and youth will likely feel both excitement and apprehension in the **anticipation of homecoming**. The family may have a boost in energy as they begin to make preparations for the return of the deployed parent. It is common to feel overwhelmed by the things to be done to get ready. Again, this can be a time of mixed feelings. Children and youth may be relieved that their parent will finally be coming home, but also worried about whether or not they will be the same and what it will be like to have them home. If the member came home on leave during the deployment, that experience may affect how the family members expect homecoming to be, whether good or bad. During this time of mixed emotions, there are some ways to support military-connected children and youth:

- ▶ Talk to them about what is going on within the family and openly listen to what they say about the upcoming homecoming.
- ▶ Remind them that their feelings are a normal, natural response to a big change, and that there are no “perfect” homecomings. Both the absent parent and the family members at home will have changed during the deployment and it will take time to adjust to those changes.
- ▶ Think positively! Help them to use this time to think about what expectations for homecoming they may have. Determine which ones are realistic and which ones may need adjusting.

## POST-DEPLOYMENT

Many families find the first few weeks after the military member’s return as stressful as the separation, or even more so.

**Young children** can feel joy and excitement upon their parent’s return, but they may also feel a need to punish the parent for their long absence. Depending on their age, a child may feel fear if they struggle to recognize the parent at first. They may need reassurance if they show increased

dependence or seem to withdraw or hide. Some children may act out from an increased need for attention or feeling competition with other family members.

**School-aged children** are more likely to give a warm reception if the relationship was strong before the deployment. Children of this age are usually excited about the return of their parent, and they may try to have all of the returning parent’s attention. However, if the relationship was strained before the separation, the child may worry about any misbehaviour during the deployment, and they may feel shy or withdrawn around the returned parent.

Reunion, like any time of stress, can cause **adolescents** to have mood swings. In addition, teenagers can be reserved in public with their emotions. They tend to be very sensitive about being judged or criticized and may be concerned about acting “cool” in front of their friends and siblings. They may equally want to impress the returning parent with their maturity.

Returning family members do best when they are patient and gentle, welcoming rather than demanding affection. They can show a friendly interest in what the child has done during deployment and praise them for their achievements.

## STAGE 6 - RENEGOTIATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Just as it is difficult to adjust to a new routine when a parent leaves, it is equally difficult to readjust when they return home. Families become used to their new routines and may hesitate to change their schedule. The excitement of the initial reunion can be joyful; however, the adjustment period can be difficult in the days and weeks to follow when everyone has to figure out the roles, responsibilities, and relationships in the household again. Most families find this stage quite stressful. The at-home parent may have become more independent. There may be new household rules. Returning members must find a way to re-establish their roles within the new family structure. The family begins to recognize that everyone has changed during the deployment. Families must work together to build a new “normal.”

## PARENTAL ABSENCES

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It takes some time (usually four to six weeks) for feelings of closeness in the family to reappear. Attempts to reconnect can be overwhelming at times, and children will need some time and space to adjust. Children and youth can be reminded that getting to know one another again does not happen all at once but gradually, and it is normal to hit some rough patches. Relationships cannot be forced and can take longer to develop in some cases.

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*"I had a hard time sleeping most nights. I'd sometimes have nightmares about what happens when my father goes back."*

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### STAGE 7 - REINTEGRATION AND STABILIZATION

As routines shift, family members will begin to feel more relaxed and eventually move into the final stage of **reintegration and stabilization**. This final stage of the deployment cycle usually starts around two to six months after the member returns. The family begins to feel a "new normal" in their routines and expectations and can feel secure, relaxed, and more comfortable with one another again. Children start to feel more confident in the family relationships and regain a sense of closeness with the returned parent.

Still, even as family members are reconnecting, emotions can remain mixed, and problems can still come up. If children and youth are having a difficult time adjusting, it is important to recognize when additional help may be needed. Families should be encouraged to reach out for additional support from teachers, **Family Information Line**, child care providers, local MFRC staff, and other important adults in the child's life.

## PERSPECTIVES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN & YOUTH

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*"I'm proud to say he is in the military: 60% I'm proud and happy; 40% I'm the opposite."*

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*"I'm happy that he's in the military because he's protecting a lot of countries, and also all I want is for him to be home every day. It makes me really sad and stressed so I'm not in the best mood."*

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In a small qualitative study using focus groups, Canadian military-connected children and youth identified parental deployment (i.e., absence) as the most or one of the most stressful experiences they have had. The main stressors were lack of parental support, concerns about the safety of the deployed parent, and lack of knowledge or understanding about what is happening to the deployed parent. For most children, their self-reported well-being dropped from 8-9 on a 10-point scale for regular days to 4-5 when the parent was deployed.

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*"I feel different because our parents are almost always gone, and the others' parents are there."*

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Some children talked about a feeling of "being different" from other children, especially when they were living in communities where there weren't many other military-connected children and youth. They also reported both mental and physical problems during a parent's deployment, such as:

- ▶ getting in trouble for their behaviour
- ▶ having a hard time concentrating and getting lower grades in school
- ▶ constant sadness and fear
- ▶ trouble sleeping
- ▶ headaches

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**"I get stressed at school and get too many headaches when my Dad is away."**

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Some of these effects could be traced to the changes children had in their day-to-day lives. They talked about how their routines had been disrupted in many ways, including:

- ▶ fewer activities than normal (due to cost or difficulties with child care or rides)
- ▶ increased responsibility around the house
- ▶ more fighting and stress at home
- ▶ changes to their family circle of friends

**In some cases, they also recognized depression and withdrawal in their at-home parent.**

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**"Mom has to be more responsible; she is more stressed because she has to do everything, manage, and cook."**

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Younger children tended to have limited knowledge of the meaning and purpose of deployment and how long their parents would be away. They were more negatively affected than older children. Providing children with details of the deployment, in age and developmentally appropriate ways, makes it easier for younger children to make sense of the absence, accept it, and adapt more positively.

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**"My teacher was aware that my dad was deployed; when I broke down, they were very supportive and understood."**

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**When asked about how they coped with the stress of deployment, these children said it helped when they:**

- ▶ got support from friends and support groups
- ▶ communicated with the deployed parent
- ▶ had more bonding time with the at-home parent
- ▶ stayed busy with active distractions (such as recreation and sports)
- ▶ had fewer changes to their routine and responsibilities.

**It is a hopeful sign that many of these children talked about getting positive support and understanding from the trusted adults in their lives, such as teachers and child care providers.**

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**"You have to remember that there are other children and youth who go through the same thing. I have to constantly remind myself of this."**

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## PARENTAL ABSENCES

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“We were both really upset and my little sister was crying. She moved over and I calmed her down. It’s almost like I’ve matured. It’s like I’m older than I actually am. It’s the way that it just kind of happens.”

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### PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

Much the same as their childrens’ responses, CAF spouses have reported both positive and negative reactions to deployment from their children. For example, over half saw their child expressing “pride in the deployed parent,” while just under half found their children more “clingy”.

Other positive reactions included children:

- ▶ accepting more responsibility
- ▶ contributing more to household chores
- ▶ showing greater independence

Unfortunately, the spouses also noticed some negative reactions, including:

- ▶ general sadness
- ▶ behavioural changes and “acting out”
- ▶ anxiety, fearfulness
- ▶ anger
- ▶ increased sibling conflict
- ▶ a decline in school performance

A majority believed that “absences of CAF parents contribute to problems among children in military families.”

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“I felt disappointed, sad, scared, outraged, unhappy, worried, and mad.”

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### SINGLE-PARENT MILITARY FAMILIES

A recent study that looked at deployment and single-parent Canadian military families showed that, like those from dual-parent families, these children and youth “showed signs of confusion, insecurity, anxiousness, behavioural problems, and academic difficulties.” Some of these parents felt that deployment had negatively affected the quality of their relationship with their child. They observed their children and youth becoming more distant during pre-deployment and having readjustment issues upon their return.

In another study on single parent military families, researchers found that older children reconnected more easily with the parent post-deployment and experienced more positive effects including increased maturity, independence, and confidence. The researchers suggested that younger children were more at risk for lower well-being because their model of attachment is only being developed, while older children can better understand the temporary nature of the separation.

One issue that can be more common in single-parent military families is the “parentification” of children. In general, children and youth of deployed members tend to take on greater roles and responsibilities at home, such as more chores and care of younger siblings. Changes like these can be positive for the child and the family as a whole. However, in some cases, they can lead to age-inappropriate responsibilities, or even a parent relying on their children and youth for emotional support. The likelihood of such “parentification” is greater in families experiencing both deployment and separation or divorce.

## LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DEPLOYMENT

Deployment has been shown to have both negative and positive long-term effects on children and youth. While most children develop resilience through the challenges of the military lifestyle, we know that some children and youth are struggling. Lengthy deployments and frequent taskings can change the relationship with the departing parent, sometimes permanently. Some studies have shown that deployment can result in behavioural, emotional, and disciplinary problems for children who showed no such issues previously. Research has shown an increased risk for academic problems and lower quality parent-child relationships related to deployment. In general, the amount of negative impact increases with the number of deployments, it is believed due to reintegration stressors (i.e. parent returning ill or injured, loss of responsibilities).

On the other hand, there are some children who develop positively as a result of their parent's deployment.

American research suggests that deployment can increase competence and self-confidence in children through their taking on extra roles and responsibilities (if age-appropriate). Youth can take pride in helping out the family and even develop character by acting as role models for their younger siblings. By sharing chores and getting through stressful situations together during the lengthy absence of a parent, children can learn about the value of family cohesion. Sometimes, a deployment fosters greater connection between children and the at-home parent and less conflict between siblings. A recent study found that some children from Canadian military families felt that deployments led to a stronger bond with the at-home parent.

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**"I release my stress and express myself through dance. That releases my anger and stress without hurting anyone."**

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# RISK

Another feature that makes military families different from civilian ones is the element of risk. Canadian Armed Forces members deploy on operational missions fully aware of the risks of working in volatile environments. This notion of risk, including the possibility of permanent injury, illness or even death, is accepted as a part of the profession of arms.

Contrary to popular belief, the risk is not limited to missions alone. Preparing for combat operations requires intensive training with lethal weapons systems, live ammunition and powerful machinery, in all types of environments, conditions and scenarios. Military members are trained to build their physical and mental endurance to prepare for duty in war zones. This type of training can be dangerous, sometimes resulting in injuries and deaths despite the precautions and safety measures put in place. A parent returning home ill or injured, or not at all, can be extremely difficult on even the most resilient of children.

The element of risk is yet another reason that support to military children in their community is so essential.

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**“Not everything he does is safe, and I worry that he is going to get hurt.”**

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## PARENT WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS OR INJURY

Studies show that, in general, the prevalence of most mental illnesses in the Canadian Armed Forces is similar to that of the general population. However for reasons that are not fully understood, military personnel have almost twice the risk of depression as their civilian counterparts.

Deployment has proven to be a risk factor for mental health problems. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) can be an issue for

some CAF military members and their families. Studies have shown that where a parent is living with PTSD, there can be effects on family members which may include psychological maltreatment of spouses and depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems in children.

## What is an Operational Stress Injury (OSI)?

An OSI is a psychological injury that may include anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance abuse, resulting from operational duties performed while serving. Difficulties may occur during combat duties, after serving in a war zone, in peacekeeping missions, or following other traumatic or serious events not specific to combat, such as grief, loss or high stress situations.

## As the OSI develops, a person may

- ▶ change how they show emotion and anger
- ▶ change how alert they are
- ▶ feel a loss of interest
- ▶ withdraw socially or experience social anxiety
- ▶ show changes in intimacy and affection
- ▶ have difficulty sleeping including nightmares or insomnia
- ▶ look and feel exhausted
- ▶ be much less patient
- ▶ lash out at their spouse and family members
- ▶ overreact
- ▶ have an increased, or different, use of drugs and alcohol
- ▶ drive aggressively
- ▶ experience mood swings

## RISK

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Unfortunately, children who live with parents with mental illness are three times more likely to develop mental health problems themselves.

Living with a parent who has mental health issues can be emotionally draining and distressing. In these situations, children often hide their suffering and do not express their sadness, anger or hurt because they want to put their parent's needs first. Children may manage their distress by adjusting to the new normal and trying to act in ways that they hope will reduce the symptoms of a parent's illness, for example, offering comfort, sharing humour, getting out of the way, cleaning the house, or decreasing irritants by helping other family members.

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*"My father was diagnosed with an OSI in 2009. My step-mother is his main caregiver and my brother and I have learned to maneuver around his symptoms. On the days he is good and able to participate in our day-to-day lives, it is great and I treasure and am thankful for those moments. When he is unable to be present I feel frustrated and angry that my father has this weight on him for the rest of his life. I am often guarded and worry about protecting him from potential triggers."*

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Another way that children tend to manage day-to-day living with an ill or injured parent is by monitoring their parent's behaviours and daily routines. They watch and listen for signs or symptoms that could signal the onset of an episode, even when parents try to hide them. The more knowledge children have about a parent's OSI, the more

accurately they can interpret their behaviour, leading to more predictability and less painful emotions. Keeping in mind that hypervigilance is a possibility, the more children know about a parent's mental illness, the more they can make helpful and healthy adjustments.

Despite the changes in their parent's behaviour, children will often try to find a way to stay connected to their parent. When this is not possible, children may take steps to preserve themselves such as avoiding the parent, withdrawing, spending more time with friends and hobbies, dealing with problems on their own, or only sharing selectively with others. It can be dangerous when teenagers "opt out" of their relationship with a parent through risky behaviours like alcohol or drug use.

Where appropriate, and in consultation with the family if possible, trusted adults can share age-appropriate information about mental health issues to help a child better understand their parent's behaviour and emotions. Knowledge can give them the tools to better monitor the situation for signs of a problem. Being empathetic and acknowledging that feelings of fear, worry, and guilt are normal for those with parents with mental health issues can help them feel less alone. There may be times when other professional community resources will be needed to assist the child.

### How to talk about OSI / PTSD with a child

*There are two kinds of injury or hurt - physical and psychological, or, the kind in your body and the kind in your mind. With physical injuries, it's the body that gets hurt, and usually there are visible signs of the injury. Psychological injuries can follow serious physical injuries, or they may happen from being exposed to very intense stress, or a traumatic or dangerous event that was very scary for the person. You can't always see psychological injuries.*

*For example, a person might see a car accident where people were badly injured, or maybe even died. The person felt intense fear and distress, which left an injury or a scar on their heart and might have put them through strong feelings like anger and shame. This affects their mood, their sleep, their ability to concentrate, their memory, and their desire to be around people. They might become impatient quickly, or get angry and annoyed easily.*

*Your parent might have experienced a traumatic event as part of their job in the military. Maybe they saw very scary things, or feared for their life and their companions' lives on a military operation in another country. This is called an operational stress injury or OSI.*

*It's not important to know about the difficult event that your parent went through. The important thing is to understand that even if your parent's injury is invisible, the sadness and pain that they're living with is very real.*

*Just like a physical injury, a psychological injury can heal. The first things that are needed are medical help and time. Medications, therapy, patience, affection, and the encouragement of family and friends can help your parent get better.*



**THERE ARE SOME BEHAVIOURS THAT A PARENT MAY DISPLAY THAT COULD BE SYMPTOMS RELATED TO AN OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURY.**

**Please remind military-connected children and youth that if their parent is struggling with an Operational Stress Injury, there are resources available if they need additional support and that it's not their fault if their parent:**

- ▶ has trouble sleeping and often has nightmares.
- ▶ yells.
- ▶ hardly talks and doesn't always listen to them.
- ▶ doesn't do many activities with them.
- ▶ is always protecting them, or is always afraid something will happen to them.
- ▶ often talks about what happened to him/her while on deployment.
- ▶ makes sudden, aggressive or violent movements.
- ▶ gets angry all of a sudden.
- ▶ cries a lot.
- ▶ drinks a lot.
- ▶ is very bossy.
- ▶ seems unable to have emotions.



# TIPS FOR SUPPORTING MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Every child's reaction to military life is unique – a combination of experience, personality, family and social dynamics, developmental stage, and pre-existing issues. Trusted adults can support young people by recognizing and appreciating each child's perspective on their individual situation. Military literacy can help in recognizing mood changes or physical complaints that may be connected to parental absences or transitions to and from school and community. Awareness is key to helping children and youth understand, anticipate, and cope with common reactions to stressors that occur before, during, and after challenging times such as a deployment or move. By asking the right questions, showing interest, and being sensitive to times of heightened stress, community members can support military-connected children and youth and contribute to the resiliency, positive problem solving, and open communication needed to get through difficult transitions.

In addition to the suggestions mentioned in this guide, here are some tips for helping military-connected children and youth:

- ☐ Be aware of other local community organizations and their programs, services, and areas of expertise as military families may not know what is available to support them.
- ☐ Make connections with military service providers in the community and refer to them as required.
- ☐ Help children and youth new to the area by:
  - ▶ becoming actively involved in their integration
  - ▶ engaging them individually by encouraging and facilitating their participation in community life and activities (i.e. finding a helper in a group setting to show them around and introduce them to other children their age).
- ☐ Where possible, create small support groups for military-connected children and youth in large community programs.
- ☐ Take into consideration the effect of frequent moves on continuity and experience in their education and extra-curricular activities.
- ☐ Try to be flexible with deadlines and prerequisites to allow military-connected children and youth to participate fully.
- ☐ Understand that frequent relocation can cause cultural unawareness and social isolation, which can have an effect on a child's behaviour. If there is problem behaviour, investigate with the child (and family, if appropriate) in a supportive, friendly way to find the best route forward.
- ☐ Offer a place where children and youth feel they can speak honestly and safely.
- ☐ When children and youth self-isolate, encourage fun activities and active strategies to relieve sadness, counteract immobilization, open the door to meeting new people, and give the child a feeling of control.
- ☐ Encourage both new and old friendships.



During a parent's deployment:

- ▶ ask parents questions to see how you can help and show interest in how the child is doing;
- ▶ acknowledge the situation and let children know that it is okay to talk about it openly;
- ▶ encourage children and youth to get or stay involved in community and extracurricular activities and maintain routines as much as possible but expect that there will be some slowdown of normal activities such as homework or training;
- ▶ help children and youth to express their feelings and stay in touch with their absent parent;
- ▶ encourage children and youth to talk to their peers about the deployment;
- ▶ support children and youth by listening and being willing to talk;
- ▶ encourage children and youth to express their feelings in healthy and appropriate ways;
- ▶ during reunion, remind children and youth that it is normal to hit some rough patches, that relationships cannot be forced and may take time to develop; and

- ▶ stay present, predictable, and responsive to a child struggling with their feelings, no matter how they are reacting, encouraging them to accept help.



If a child has a parent with a mental health injury or illness:

- ▶ where appropriate, share age-appropriate information about mental health issues, and
- ▶ be empathetic and acknowledge that fear, worry, and guilt are common feelings for children and youth with parents with mental health issues.



Recognize when additional help may be needed, and encourage families to reach out for additional support from teachers, **Family Information Line**, child care providers, local MFRC staff, and other trusted adults in the community.

## WHEN MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN AND YOUTH NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP

Military families often face wait lists for all kinds of health services. Frequent relocation can mean they bounce from wait list to wait list for things like primary care, psychological services, and specialist care. In some cases, children and youth may go for years without seeing a regular family physician, making monitoring and referral processes unavailable or inconsistent. When a child moves often, there may not be anyone outside of the family who is consistently present in their lives who may notice if something is going wrong. Medical and mental health issues may not be followed up with or treated in a continuous, comprehensive manner.

It is important for community workers, as front-line professionals, to watch for changes in behaviour, academic performance, and social activities that may indicate a more serious problem. It is worth paying extra attention to military-connected children and youth who seem to be struggling in a way that is interfering with their functioning. Trusted adults should be aware of the higher risk of psychological distress associated with relocation for older children. They may be able to intervene before clinical levels of depression develop.

Like others, children and youth of military families are not immune to the mental health concerns that affect one in five. Sometimes, the difference between a normal and a serious reaction is one of degree and duration. For example, when “normal” reactions to stressful events like a parent’s deployment go beyond six weeks, a conversation with a parent and a referral for evaluation may be appropriate. This could look like a child who:

- ▶ continues to have high levels of emotional response such as continued crying and intense sadness

- ▶ appears depressed, withdrawn or non-communicative
- ▶ expresses violent or depressed feelings in “dark” drawings or writings
- ▶ intentionally hurts or cuts themselves or appears at risk of hurting others
- ▶ gains or loses a significant amount of weight
- ▶ stops taking care of their personal appearance
- ▶ shows signs of a possible drug or alcohol problem

These behaviours could result from overwhelming stresses occurring in the family, or from an underlying mental disorder. While rare, a child in acute distress should be referred for immediate evaluation. Signs of a serious stress reaction include:

- ▶ unfocused agitation or hysteria
- ▶ disconnection from peers or adults
- ▶ serious depression or withdrawal
- ▶ auditory or visual hallucinations
- ▶ suicidal ideation (thoughts, plans, means)

In cases where a child is showing warning signs of serious distress over time and more professional help may be needed, you can assist parents in identifying the necessary supports and providing referrals to counselling and mental health services. Follow up to ensure service has occurred. For mental health, educational or development-related issues that are within your scope of practice and boundaries of competence, consider fast-tracking children to address their needs.



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# WHAT EXISTS FOR MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

## **Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS)**

Offers a variety of programs and services specifically for military-connected children and youth. They are offered online, by phone, or in-person, so that every family member can have access to some support no matter where they live.

## **Military Family Services (MFS) Education Services Education@cfmws.com**

Works with government partners to advocate for policies that will help to mitigate the barriers families face as they move from one system to another. CAF families can access our education staff directly to receive coaching and pathway planning.

Provides information to families through seminars and presentations on a variety of topics including but not limited to elementary, secondary, and post-secondary transitions.

Provides education supports including the Support Our Troops (SOT) Tutoring Program.

## **Family Information Line (FIL) FIL-LIF@cfmws.com**

FIL is available to military families 24/7 (1-800-866-4546). Through FIL, CAF families can access a counsellor who will help guide them to the appropriate resources to meet their specific circumstances.

FIL can help families assess and plan for emergencies. If families are in distress, FIL can offer immediate support.

FIL can help families find Emergency Child Care, or introduce you to Support Our Troops for emergency financial assistance, a duty Padre, police or medical services.

## **Emergency Family Care Assistance (EFCA)**

CAF Families may be eligible to receive financial assistance to help offset costs associated with care of a family member.

Families can contact FIL or their local MFRC for information on the EFCA.

## **Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs)**

MFRCs are essentially the heart of their military communities. Dedicated staff are frontline service providers, responsible for connecting military families to a wide range of programs and services. Their goal is to build strong, resilient individuals, families and communities.

## **Family Care Plan**

A Family Care Plan is a mandatory form (DND form 2886) that prepares families of CAF members to be taken care of in case of unforeseen events, emergency callouts and planned deployment. By identifying primary and secondary caregivers who should be contacted in the event of an emergency or military tasking, the Family Care Plan supports families when the primary caregiver is absent.

## **Kids Help Phone**

Children, youth and young adults from military families can access free mental health and well-being support by texting the keyword CAFKIDS at 686868. The Crisis Text Line powered by Kids Help Phone is confidential and available day or night.

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# SPREADING THE WORD: RAISING MILITARY LITERACY IN CIVILIAN YOUTH

Most Canadian children and youth learn about the military from television and movies that tend to focus on the American experience. They may know very little about Canada's military and their families. Military-connected children and youth do better when not only trusted adults, but other children and youth also know about the reality of the Canadian military lifestyle.

Depending on your work, it might be possible to include military contexts in group activities. Some children may welcome the chance to share their experience, while others may wish to share more privately. Simply discussing the circumstances of relocation and parental separation can help military-connected children and youth feel a sense of safety and belonging. Military family experiences can be added to regular program topics without drawing attention to any individual child. For example, if appropriate, select topics that are relevant to military children as well as other children and youth, such as fitting in at a new school, missing old friends, feeling different, missing a parent, feeling uncertain about the future, being worried about a parent or feeling anxious about the news. You can also explore strengths and issues related to deployment and other military life factors.



# RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands.

As trusted adults working with children, strength-based approaches are keys to success in most situations. Whether promoting general wellness or mental health, or working with children in social, athletic, or educational settings, combining your professional knowledge and skills with military literacy will improve the support and encouragement you can offer to military-connected children and youth. This will enhance the lives of all military families.

Most military-connected children and youth also tend to be resilient, physically and mentally healthy, and living in supportive homes. In the past, research has focused on the negative effects of relocation and deployment on children. But, despite the struggles of moving and missing a parent, military-connected children and youth themselves have some positive things to say about being from a military family. A small sample of children from Canadian military families reported some positive elements of the military lifestyle. Some children and youth expressed pride in their parents for keeping Canada and other countries safe. For those that had been posted outside of Canada, some enjoyed the chance to visit and live in other countries. In general, children expressed that they were happy if the military lifestyle made their parents happy.

People who work with military-connected children and youth are starting to look at the potential positive effects of relocation on military children. Research is turning towards the idea of **RESILIENCE**.

Despite its many challenges, the military lifestyle can have positive effects for children. For example, the mobility associated with the military lifestyle can offer youth the chance to learn new languages and experience new cultures. Moving to foreign countries is linked to a stronger self-identity and less anxiety about the unfamiliar in children and youth, as well as stronger bonds with their parents.

Researchers talk about the concept of “positive stress,” that is, an amount of stress that is manageable and can lead to children’s growth, mastery, and self-control. In that sense, typically stressful experiences such as the long absence of a parent can actually help children and youth develop coping strategies and learn to positively adapt to future stresses. Also, being a part of a military community can build a sense of belonging through sharing common experiences. In general, the military lifestyle provides lots of opportunities for positive development. Like all children and youth, every military child experiences the military lifestyle in their own way, depending on their age, level of resilience, personality, and past experiences.

At Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, we know that communities are willing and able to help military-connected children and youth lead full, positive lives, with access to the same opportunities and services as other Canadian children and youth. With the right tools and understanding, it is something we can work together to accomplish. We thank you for caring about military-connected children and youth and for your curiosity and desire to learn about the military lifestyle.

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"I also feel proud that my dad is in the military, and happy because I have had the chance to go to other countries and then come back and say I have seen this, this, and this."

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# LEARNING THE LINGO

**Bases / Stations / Wings:** A Canadian Forces Base (CFB) is a military installation. Bases provide housing and support services for the military units assigned to it. A Canadian Forces Station (CFS) is a minor military installation. Stations are operationally oriented units that usually do not have support capability. A Wing is the Air Force equivalent of a base.

**Chain of Command:** The line of authority and responsibility along which orders are passed within and between military units. The chain of command is the structure by which command is exercised through a series of superior and subordinate commanders.

**IR (Imposed Restriction):** A military kid may say that their parent is on IR. This means that their parent has been posted to a new place of duty but has, because of circumstances, decided to move without their family. This is a temporary situation, but can still be very difficult for children.

**MFRC (Military Family Resource Centre):** MFRCs or Military Family Resource Centres provide family support and community programs and services to CAF military families.

**MFS (Military Family Services):** As part of the CFMWS team, MFS strives to support CAF families in navigating the challenges that can arise due to conditions of military service. MFS develops the programs, governance and services available through the Military Family Services Program and Veteran Family Program.

Many programs and services are available and delivered through local MFRCs. MFS also offers 24/7 support to military families via the Family Information Line.

**NCM Non-commissioned member:** A non-commissioned member is a serviceman or woman other than an officer.

**Officer:** An officer is a serviceman or woman who has received the King's (or Queen's) or Viceroy's (or Governor General's) Commission or a CAF member who holds the rank of officer cadet.

**Regular vs Reserve Force:** Canadian Armed Forces members can be either Regular or Reserve Force members (reservists). Regular Force members work full time within the military and can be relocated and ordered on operational deployments at any time throughout their career. Reservists are Canadian Armed Forces members who have voluntarily chosen to devote some of their time to military service. They often serve weekends and evenings, and they are not relocated or deployed unless they volunteer. Some reservists volunteer to serve on a full time basis.

**Release / Retirement:** Release from the Canadian Armed Forces is when a member leaves the service before the end of their Term of Service. This occurs for a variety of reasons including medical, voluntary, misconduct or unsatisfactory service. Retirement occurs when their contract is complete, with either a minimum of 20 years or 25 years of service. A member can work to 60 years of age, well beyond the 25 years of service mark for some.



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# OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

## CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Kids Help Phone  
24/7 free, confidential and multilingual support for young people through phone, text and online resources.  
KidsHelpPhone.ca  
**Text CAFKIDS to 686868**

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)  
**cmha.ca**

Sun Life Chair in Adolescent Mental Health  
Evidence-based information on mental health issues impacting teens and personal stories.  
**<https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/>**

eMentalHealth  
Online directory of mental health services by region  
**ementalhealth.ca**

HIGH FIVE®  
Canada's quality standard for children's programs.  
**HIGHFIVE.org**

Canadian Centre for Child Protection  
Access to specialized training to help individuals working with children increase their awareness about child sexual abuse and learn how they can help safeguard children. By actively engaging in such training opportunities, communities are empowered to contribute to a safer and more secure environment for all military-connected children and youth, fostering a protective and supportive atmosphere for military families.  
**protectchildren.ca**

## BULLYING AND CYBER SAFETY

Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PrevNet)  
Canada's authority on research and resources for bullying prevention.  
**[www.prevnet.ca](http://www.prevnet.ca)**

Get Cyber Safe  
Cyberbullying information.  
**[www.getcybersafe.gc.ca](http://www.getcybersafe.gc.ca)**

## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AND OTHER OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURIES

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Association of Canada  
**[ptsdassociation.com](http://ptsdassociation.com)**

Operational Stress Injury Social Support (OSISS)  
Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs  
Canada partnership to provide a confidential, national peer support network  
**[cfmws.ca/support-services/health-wellness/mental-health/](http://cfmws.ca/support-services/health-wellness/mental-health/)**

## RESEARCH ON MILITARY AND FAMILY HEALTH

Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) **[cimvhr.ca](http://cimvhr.ca)**

CIMVHR's Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health  
**[jmvfh.utpjournals.press](http://jmvfh.utpjournals.press)**

## DEPLOYMENT AND RELOCATION SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

Sesame Street for Military Families  
**[sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org](http://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org)**



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An online version of this guide can be found at [cfmws.ca](http://cfmws.ca)



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