

Youth Count Column: July 2012: “Military Kids – A Different Kind of Special Needs

Military children face all the challenges that non-military kids face: adolescence, bullying, peer pressure, dating - plus an entire array of issues and needs particular to having a parent in the military. Especially when a parent deploys, children have the proverbial rug pulled out from under them.

There are many means by which military units work to prepare children and families for a prolonged absence of typically a year. But regardless of age or preparation, children and teens – even adults, just cannot fathom a year without their beloved soldier. With only 1 short visit in a 12 month period and no phone or internet communication schedule that isn't continually subject to change, kids are left with a hole-in-the heart absence that can cause sadness, guilt, resentment, fear, anxiety, confusion, and anger.

These feelings may manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Young children may experience sleep difficulties or bad dreams, eating difficulties, fear of new people or situations, or the desire to keep their primary caregiver constantly in sight. Adolescents may experience irritability or crankiness, low self-esteem, apathy, lots of anger over small things, a drop in grades, and anger toward at-home parent.

I always try to give you, the reader, ideas for how you can help youth be resilient and successful. Today I thank you for indulging me as I couple my passion for building strong youth with my passion for supporting our military men and women.

The majority of the 387th Military Police Company based at the New Albany National Guard Armory is currently deployed to Afghanistan. I'm the mom of one of these soldiers and I chair their Family Readiness Group.. Just with these several dozen soldiers there are more than 75 children who are facing the special challenges of deployment. Add to that number, the nephews, nieces, and cousins who are concerned about their particular soldier; we have a great number of these “special” needs kids right here. Some members of our community are already with supporting these kids, families, and soldiers.

Lauren McNeeley, Miss Harvest Homecoming Outstanding Teen 2011, is passionate about supporting the military and their families and who certainly demonstrates many of the 40 Assets, including Service to Others, Caring, Youth as Resources, and Interpersonal Competence. Lauren's dad deployed to Afghanistan for a year when she was a child. She understands the sacrifice soldiers and their families make in order to support freedom and she now works to support both the deployed soldiers and their families. She and her family have provided child care so that parents can attend Family Readiness Group meetings. Lauren designed two cards: one for soldiers and one for soldier families and took these cards to events in New Albany and Jeffersonville where she asked community members to write personal messages on the cards. These cards are on their way to Afghanistan and to the local family members.

Members of Faithpoint Church in Floyds Knobs formed FOB Faithpoint to help soldiers as they prepared to deploy and to support the families with handyman and yard help, special activities for families, wife and family support, and more.

A generous donor in Clark County made Hug-A-Hero dolls available to children of deployed service members. These fabric dolls show a picture of the deployed parent and are perfect for little arms needing to hug or snuggle.

What can you do to help these very special kids? Listen to them. Give them opportunities to write a letter or draw a picture that you send to the deployed parent. Help the kids indirectly by helping the parent at home.

If you want more ideas on how to help these youth, their families, or the soldiers – because as we've found, each entity needs to know the other entity is supported – contact me at barbara@youthcount.com or 812-923-1160. Visit our website at www.youthcount.com