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Responding to the Needs of Geographically Dispersed Military Youth

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Responding to the Needs of Geographically Dispersed Military Youth

Abstract

When the U.S. military reshaped its deployment methods in response to conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of deployed Reserve and National Guard soldiers increased to nearly half of all deployed servicemen. Unfortunately, support to reduce the stresses of deployment is not readily available to these families because they live in geographically dispersed civilian communities. In 2011, Utah 4-H responded as the key partner and ideal organization to align resources and work with community partners to provide a variety of summer camps designed to support military families during the Post-Deployment stage of the Deployment Cycle.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension system has a deep-rooted history and clear commitment to serving military families (Ames et al., 2011). To reduce the strain on public food supplies during World Wars I and II, Extension developed programs such as "victory gardens," educated consumers about food preservation, and coordinated drives for scrap metal (Jones & Roueche, 2007). In recent years the military has reshaped its deployment methods in order to adapt to the demands of disparate global conflicts. In the course of Operation Desert Storm, Reserve soldiers comprised just 25% of deployed servicemen (Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1992, 1991). Due to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent troop surge of 2007, this number of deployed Reserve and National Guard soldiers accumulated to 40-50% of deployed servicemen (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009).

At no other time in history has such a large population of Reserve and National Guard units been deployed. This adaptation in deployment methods is significant because families of these soldiers are located in geographically dispersed civilian communities, not traditional military installations where important services to support the stresses of deployment are readily available. Programs for military youth have not been a widespread focus for Extension; nevertheless Extension professionals have the youth development skills and resources of the land-grant university to support military families experiencing deployment (Edwin, McKinley, & Talbert, 2010). Here we present the impacts of hosting multiple summer camps as a method of reaching out to geographically dispersed military youth

through Operation: Military Kids (OMK) in partnership with 4-H.

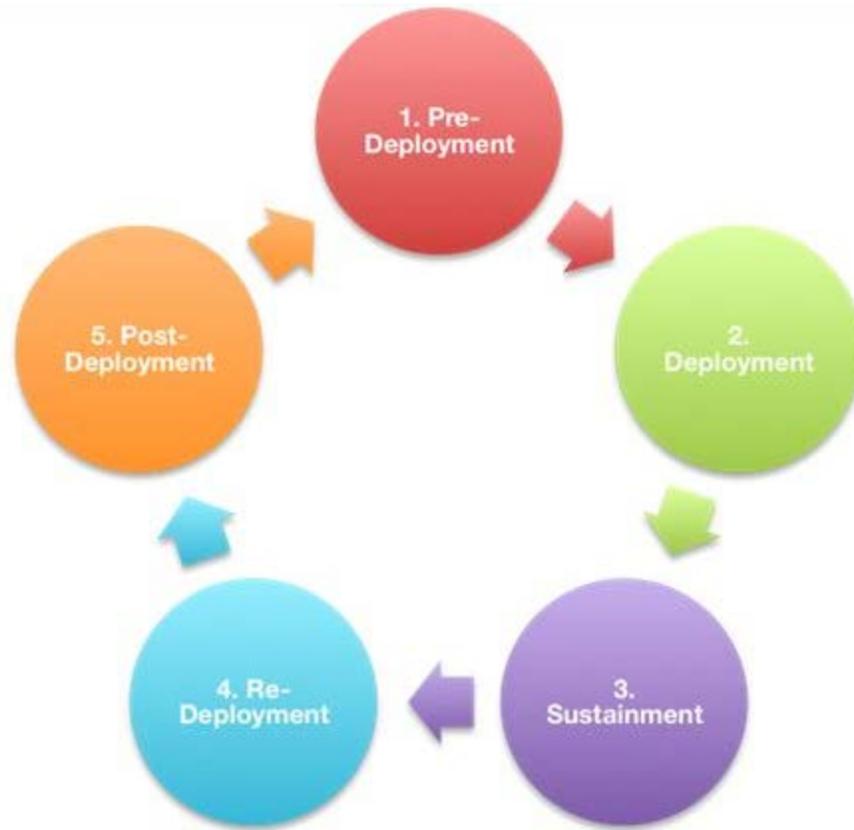
OMK is the U.S. Army's collaborative effort with America's communities to support youth impacted by deployment. OMK's goal is to connect youth from military families with local resources so they can obtain a sense of community support and enhanced well-being. OMK accomplishes this by providing access to youth programs and support services where military children live. In many states, OMK has partnered with state 4-H programs to support positive youth development education with research-based curricula and the expertise of youth development professionals. 4-H programs serve as excellent partners because 4-H provides predictable programming and a safe and nurturing environment for military kids facing lengthy and frequent deployments (4-H Military Partnerships, 2007).

Program Delivery: How Utah Responded

Utah State University (USU) and the OMK program began its partnership in 2007. In the first several years, OMK summer camps and afterschool programs grew substantially. In 2011, USU Extension's 4-H Youth Development program responded as the key partner prepared to address the needs of a geographically dispersed population of military families with the largest number of weeklong and overnight camps for military youth ever. With a presence in every county of the state and an established history of serving in local communities by building capacity through community partnerships, USU Extension was the ideal candidate to work with community partners by aligning resources to support these families during the Post-Deployment (reunion and reintegration) stage of the deployment cycle (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

The Deployment Cycle



When military parents are deployed, their children need special support to assist them in coping with the emotional challenges caused by the deployment cycle (Johnson, n.d.). OMK programs, delivered by 4-H, function to provide stability in their family system despite the temporary disruption of deployment that results in increased levels of stress and separation anxiety (Ames et al., 2011).

Due to the serious need of serving a wide range of age groups in scattered locations across Utah, a supplemental OMK summer camp grant was applied for and received in 2012 to provide additional experiences to youth in military families. The grant requirements included either 5 days of continuous camp or an overnight experience for at least 2 nights, with camp experiences providing activities that build resiliency skills in youth.

Rather than organizing one large statewide camp, like most states have done, the decision was made to spread the camps throughout the state to give more youth more opportunities. Bringing camps to the youth allowed more time at different camps and reduced the distance parents had to travel. In addition, feedback from National Guard partners and families suggested the need for a statewide overnight camp. This was met with a camp at the Camp Williams National Guard training facility. An important part of the OMK Team process has been the frequent communication between partners to meet the needs of military families and not duplicate efforts.

Targeted Resiliency Skills

Utah 4-H and OMK staff partnered to plan and develop a series of summer camps designed to nurture resilience in military youth experiencing the reunion and reintegration of a deployed parent. The OMK summer camp grant's Request for Proposal (RFP), developed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), identified the following skills to be taught during the camps:

- Communication
- Self-Efficacy
- Competence
- Relationships
- Resilience

These skills were taught and evaluated through classic 4-H team-building activities facilitated between five week-long camps held across the state. Camp locations were held in targeted areas of Utah with high deployment rates (Figure 2):

Figure 2.
2012 OMK/4-H Summer Camps



The camps were not advertised as "resiliency building sessions" for military youth, but rather fun-filled camps full of adventure, exploration, and discovery. The skills identified by the DoD were taught by following the experiential learning model.

1. Communication

Campers fostered communication skills through their ability to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas as they completed individual and group activities that took place river rafting through rapids, in evening campfire gatherings, and working together to design and program autonomous robots. Team-building games and activities allowed youth to express ideas and feelings about their experiences in life and the deployment of a loved one. Camp counselors encouraged positive strategies for campers to communicate.

2. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to judgments of and beliefs in personal capability, whereas self-esteem or self-concept looks specifically at self-worth (Bandura, 1997). Kasdin defined self-efficacy as "people's belief in their capabilities to perform in ways that give them control over events that affect their lives" and regulate human function through cognitive, motivational, emotional, and choice processes (Kasdin, 2000, p. 212). Throughout the week campers were presented with open-ended challenges where they had to come up with creative solutions. Challenges came in many forms: navigating a river, building a robot, sewing, video production, and craft projects, as well as participating in a ropes challenge course.

3. Competence

Competence is the ability to do something successfully. Throughout the camps youth were given opportunities to tackle challenges in cooking, sewing, robotics, and GPS projects—working in teams to solve critical problems. While some guidelines were given, there were many opportunities for youth to learn and make their own choices. Staff and counselors recognized each youth for making decisions that lead to successful outcomes. Some projects and challenges allowed for campers to figure out their own mistakes and solve problems for themselves.

4. Relationships

Throughout the camps, youth had opportunities to foster relationships with other campers, counselors, staff, and volunteers. Staff cultivated safe environments where youth could discover their abilities through various icebreaker and team-building activities. The activities and projects at the camps were merely props on the stage, which allowed campers the opportunity to foster meaningful relationships with other military youth, counselors, and staff.

5. Resilience

In addition to activities, reflection on what happened in the projects and team-building activities were discussed. Deep discussion around building their ability to adapt and bounce back from the adverse stress they experience in their life outside of camp was achieved. Staff focused on the positive aspects of camper's lives, maintaining that they come from patriotic families, how they as civilians feel fortunate, safe, and thankful for their heroic sacrifices, and that they have high expectations for them. Through these dialogues youth were taught that resiliency was not a skill they could learn, but rather a characteristic they already had within them that needed to be nurtured

(Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011, p. 24).

Evaluation Results

From the five camps delivered in Utah, just under 30% of the 235 campers, ages 7-18, completed surveys at the end of each camp. We would have preferred a higher response rate; however, the evaluations were optional, and most youth and parents simply declined to participate. One of the grant requirements was that we participate in an overall summer camp evaluation process coordinated by Virginia Tech. The Virginia Tech Community and Family Research Lab assembled and analyzed the two age-appropriate surveys, developed by the American Camping Association for the DoD. While the items we were required to measure did not ideally align with the skills previously listed in the RFP, the impacts are still significant.

Instrumentation

The Camper Learning Scale survey was administered to campers ages 6-10. It consisted of 14 items related to improvements across these six domains:

- Friendship
- Family Citizenship
- Teamwork
- Perceived Competence
- Interest in Exploration
- Responsibility

Each item rated with a 4-point scale from 1 "I didn't learn anything about this," 2 "I'm not sure," 3 "I learned a little about this," to 4 "I learned a lot about this." The mean scale score was computed for all participants who completed the 14-item scale.

The Youth Outcomes Battery survey was administered to campers ages 11-18 years old. It was comprised of these five scales measuring:

- Friendship
- Independence
- Competence
- Responsibility
- Teamwork

Each item rated with a 5-point scale from 1 "decreased," 2 "did not increase or decrease," 3 "increased a little bit maybe," 4 "increased some I am sure," to 5 "increased a lot I am sure."

Social Support, Satisfaction and Stress levels were assessed using an established scale with response categories ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with a neutral response included. Mean scale scores were computed and compared to normative data collected by the American Camping Association.

Outcomes

Outcomes of campers ages 6-10 from the Camper Learning Scale:

- A mean score of 3.1 out of 4 indicated campers perceived learning across the six domains.
- 92% indicated that they would recommend the camp to their friends.
- 100% of campers indicated that they would return to the camp next year if it was offered.

Outcomes of campers ages 11-18 from the *Youth Outcomes Battery* (Figure 3):

- Mean scores of all scales were above 3.7 out of 5, indicating significant levels of perceived improvement.
- The mean scale scores for Competence, Independence, Responsibility, and Teamwork were all above the national norm with campers placing within the 50th-70th%ile.
- 80% agreed that they had social support.
- 63% agreed that that participating in the camp reduced their stress levels in dealing with parental deployment.
- 89% agreed that they would recommend the camp to their friends.
- 94% indicated that they would return to the camp next year if it was offered.

As campers worked through these challenges throughout the week they began to build their self-efficacy, realizing they possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to solve the challenges that face them. Many youth opened up, expressing that the camp(s) helped to increase their confidence and lessen their burden of stress.

Figure 3.

Utah Mean Scores and Ranking with Normative Scores of Campers Ages 10-18 from the Youth Outcomes Battery

Scale	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentile
Friendship	50	3.73	.71	40th – 50th
Competence	47	3.82	.71	50th – 60th
Independence	50	4.02	.70	60th – 70th
Responsibility	52	3.83	.87	60th – 70th
Teamwork	49	3.97	.78	60th – 70th

Quotes from OMK Camps

The following comments came unsolicited from youth and/or their parents after attending a summer OMK camp.

"Overall the experience was great! I liked that everyone worked together and we all had a blast! I have learned so much about myself and how to deal with different situations." - Ashley, Youth (Air Force)

"This experience was a once in a lifetime opportunity for my children to bond with other military children. The staff and volunteers were professional, fun, and created an environment that the kids could thrive and find comfort in. What a privilege for them to escape the stresses of military life and have fun." - Mindy, Parent (UT National Guard)

"Watching the kids overcome the obstacles shows us and themselves what they can overcome." - Chris, Volunteer

"My boys feel so special when they go to OMK activities. I'm amazed at how much work and effort all of the staff and volunteers put into everything. I know being a part of OMK is one of the things that helped my kids get through their dad's deployment positively. Thank you, Thank you!" - Shani, Parent (UT National Guard)

"I love these scrapbooks, they are so cool! When I am sad or lonely I can look at the pictures of my new friends and remember that I am not alone and that they are all there for me. I can't wait to come back and do this next year!" - Katie, Youth (UT National Guard)

"It makes me feel good to be able to help younger military kids through deployment. Even though my own dad is gone and I miss him, it makes me feel better to help to teach them that we are all there for each other and that we will help each other through the bad and enjoy the good." - Shailynn, Youth (DoD Contractor)

Summary and Conclusion

The Utah 4-H and OMK staff recognize that military deployment has a significant impact on military youth and families. The absence of a loved one surely cannot be replaced by a camp experience;

however, these camps have proven to assist children and youth in developing the life skills that nurture resiliency.

By targeting communities with high deployment rates and hosting multiple OMK camps throughout Utah, 235 youth experienced more opportunities to nurture their personal resilience. Providing 4-H professionals with this opportunity to serve military children in a summer camp setting proved to be an effective method for Extension to support military families.

Extension's infrastructure at state and county levels combined with the expertise and experience of Extension professionals in working with youth presents a unique context for involving military youth in future programs (Edwin et al., 2010). The unique stressors and challenges youth face when a parent is deployed calls for Extension to reach out. This is a time for Extension to deploy its resources with full force to support military youth and families (Ferrari, 2005).

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