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Considerations for Creating Successful Camps for Military Families

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Considerations for Creating Successful Camps for Military Families

Abstract

Experiences of wartime deployment affect the entire family system. Due to the increasing popularity of camping with the military youth audience, the residential camp format has been extended to reach the entire family. Based on the experiences in our state for the past 6 years, we believe we have found a format that works well in meeting the needs of military families. This article discusses situations faced by military families experiencing deployment, presents a rationale for conducting camps for military families, and summarizes Ohio's experience conducting such camps, including staffing, types of program activities, and evaluation.

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This article summarizes Ohio's experience conducting camps for military families. I briefly review the situation faced by military families experiencing deployment and present a rationale for conducting camps for military families. The remainder of the article shares considerations for planning and implementing camps for this audience.

Why Camps for Military Families?

Situation: Military Families and Deployment

Military deployments have occurred at an unprecedented rate in the past decade (Department of Defense, 2010). Experiences of wartime deployment and reintegration affect the entire family system (Lester & Flake, 2013; Lester, Paley, & Saltzman, 2013; Masten, 2013b), creating changes and challenges that are stressful for youth, the at-home parents, and service members (Gewirtz & Zamir, 2014; Lester & Flake, 2013; Newby et al., 2005).

Research shows that outcomes for youth are dependent upon parents' ability to deal with deployment and military life (Barker & Berry, 2009; Chandra et al., 2010; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Lester et al., 2010). Additionally, social and community support helps families to manage stress during deployments (Flake et al., 2009), but such supports may be lacking for National Guard and Reserve service members (Paley et al., 2013).

Camps for Families

There are many reasons to support conducting camps for military families. The camp setting supports positive youth development (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007; Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011). Thus, camps have gained popularity as a means to engage with military youth (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Burns, & Griffin, 2012; Clary & Ferrari, 2014; Ferrari & zumFelde, 2010; Hill & Francis, 2014; Le, 2014). More recently, the residential camp format has been extended to reach families in general (Garst, Baughman, Franz, & Seidel, 2013) and specialty audiences (e.g., Recker & Mader, 1996; Torretta, 2004). In general, such camps have been found to foster family connections (Agate & Covey, 2007).

Another body of research suggests that natural environments have restorative value and can contribute to stress relief (Ryan et al., 2010), which is a desirable outcome for military families. Despite its challenges, dealing with deployment can have positive aspects and can promote growth (Castenada et al., 2008; Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013; Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2015), another desirable outcome. Therefore, the design of a camp program should incorporate these aspects and align with recommendations to adopt ecological family systems (Paley, Lester, & Mogil, 2013) and strengths-based approaches (Park, 2011).

Nationally, 4-H has responded to the need by offering camps for military families; in 2015, there were 10 states funded through a

partnership of the Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Despite the growing popularity of family camps, a search of the literature did not uncover any published articles related to camps specifically for military families. The description provided here is a first step in filling that gap.

Ohio's Family Camp Experience

In partnership with the National Guard, Ohio Military Kids 4-H program has conducted 23 camps for military families since 2009. These camps have become quite popular, reaching over 2,000 participants from all service branches. Our experience is that family camps can accommodate families of different sizes, ages, and configurations (e.g., single-parent family, extended family, Gold Star families [those who have lost a service member]). The format works well for all phases of the deployment cycle.

As with camps for youth, family camps provide the opportunity to meet others experiencing a similar situation, which is particularly important in a state where the majority of the military population lives throughout the state and not near any military installation. Furthermore, the camp setting enables families to "get away from it all" without the daily hassles of preparing meals and distractions of television and technology. Both aspects can help with relieving stress.

Planning Considerations

There are a variety of aspects to consider when planning a family camp program.

Size

Each family is housed in a cabin, therefore the size of the group is limited to the number of cabins available at a camp facility. Camps have averaged 20-25 families and about 75-100 participants.

Funding

Funding partners such as the USO make the camps affordable for families to attend. Families pay a small fee; however, this fee is waived in cases of financial need.

Marketing and Registration

Camps are marketed through a variety of outlets, including marketing fliers at events, email distribution lists, and social media. Marketing materials include a link to an on-line registration site, which facilitates collecting necessary information. Families complete standard health and permission forms.

Staffing

There are a variety of roles to be filled when planning and implementing a camp. We have found that camps may be staffed with a combination of paid staff, volunteers, and service members. Table 1 describes staff roles.

Table 1.
Description of Staff Roles

Role	Time Frame	Description
Planning Team	Before camp	Locate camp facility and make necessary arrangements for food and lodging, plan activities and schedule; develop budget and obtain funding; arrange for resource people, order t-shirts, create supply lists, purchase supplies; recruit volunteers; develop risk management plan; pack supplies.
Marketing	Before camp	Develop marketing fliers, share through social media outlets, and send email to distribution lists.
Registration	Before camp	Create registration form, manage on-line registration; send follow-up information and forms, answer questions; create cabin assignments; collect forms (e.g., health form) prior or onsite; prepare "swag bags" of resources (see Table 2).
	On-site	Check-in participants once onsite.

Nurse	On-site	Review health forms; deal with accidents, illness, and emergency situations that arise onsite.
Activity Leader(s)	On-site	Lead group activities (e.g., ice breakers); teach crafts; teach other educational sessions (e.g., making healthy snacks), etc.
Photographer	On-site	Take photographs during camp (both staged and candid) and print for use in family photo frames.
Evaluation and Reporting	Before camp	Prepare evaluation form.
	After camp	Distribute and collect evaluation form, compile evaluation results; conduct after action review; organize photos for use in reports and marketing; report and share results with stakeholders.
<i>Note:</i> Roles may be shared by more than one individual. As well, an individual may perform more than one of these roles.		

Program Components

Table 2 describes the types of activities we have included in the camp program. When planning the camp program, the goal is to achieve a balance of structure and flexibility. Another consideration for program organizers is to create a welcoming environment. Many of the activities offer a degree of challenge and novelty. These are activities that families often do not get a chance to participate in; they are valuable for enhancing family adaptability (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001).

Embedded in all of the fun activities, the theme of building resilience underlies the camp program. A resilience framework is recommended to promote success in military families (Masten, 2013a). To incorporate concepts of resilience, we have used the theme of "Hunt the Good Stuff" as a way to introduce the concepts of optimism and gratitude (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Closely aligned are those activities designed to facilitate teamwork and family cohesion. Tie-dyeing camp T-shirts and creating family photo frames are tangible mementos of the weekend. These activities serve to create a camp connection and a family identity. The beaming smile on the face of a military service member making his first tie-dye T-shirt is priceless.

Table 2.
Camp Program Components

Purpose	Type of Activity	Brief Description
Welcoming Environment	Family "swag bags"	Available when families arrive at camp - Cloth shopping bags filled with practical items such as flashlights, camp T-shirts; some items contributed by partners and donors.
	Icebreakers	Various activities that serve to help participants get acquainted with each other and feel comfortable in the camp setting
Resilience	Hunt the Good Stuff	Concepts introduced at the opening session and reviewed again at the closing. Describe two types of good stuff: "good" good stuff and "lemons into lemonade" good stuff.
		"Hunt the Good Stuff" board and treasure chest: Participants share "good stuff" at breakfast; good stuff cards are attached to the board in exchange for a small treasure from the treasure chest (e.g., crayons, jump rope, puzzle, etc.)
Adaptability	Novel, challenging activities (<i>balance activities</i> ¹)	For example: kayaking, canoeing, high ropes, etc.
		For example, all-camp "minute-to-win-it" type challenges (e.g., cup stacking, solving riddles). Typically done outdoors, but can be moved indoors in the case of inclement weather.
Family cohesion	Routine, everyday activities	For example, playing board games, campfires (toasting marshmallows, singing camp songs), doing crafts (tie-dyeing T-shirts, family photo frames), eating meals as a family, having down time in cabins

	(core activities ¹)	Making family photo frames, using photos taken and printed during the weekend
¹ Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001		

Evaluation

Participants complete a short evaluation form at the end of the weekend (one per family). Feedback from participants has been extremely positive and is consistent with indicators of family functioning (i.e., family cohesion and adaptability) (Table 3). A recurring theme from the post-camp evaluations is that parents and children appreciate the chance to take a break and to spend quality time together as a family. They also enjoy the activities and the connections that they develop with other military families. When asked what they would tell other military families, one family simply wrote "Go! Go! Go!"

Table 3.
Themes and Representative Quotes from Family Camp Evaluations

Theme	Representative Quotes
<i>Cohesion/Quality Family Time</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It was a PERFECT weekend! Full of fun and giggles. It was a great time to reconnect as a family. We can't say thank you enough!</i> • <i>This is an amazing opportunity to get away and enjoy wholesome family activities.</i> • <i>Great chance to bond with your kids in a supportive environment.</i> • <i>Our family enjoyed every moment and the memories will last a lifetime.</i>
<i>Fun Activities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's an escape from the pressures of military life and a great chance to do adventurous, exciting activities.</i> • <i>The best weekend of the summer – lots of family-friendly fun! We loved it!</i> • <i>This camp struck the right balance between structured and unstructured activities.</i>
<i>Meeting Other Families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's a great way to reconnect with your family and to meet other military families.</i> • <i>We had a great time and met some great people.</i>
<i>Benefits to Military Families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I cannot say enough great things about this program and its effects on military families. Everything was fabulous and we are so thankful you helped us make these special memories!"</i> • <i>"These past 9-10 years have been hard on military families. The USO has always been there for us. Thank you so much."</i> • <i>"It was a fantastic break from our day-to-day crazy life...the kids thoroughly enjoyed themselves. This was a break we otherwise could not have afforded."</i>

Conclusions

Based on consistent enthusiastic feedback, we believe we have found a format that works well in meeting military families' needs. Camps are one way to provide programming that is consistent with recommendations to enhance the well-being of military families (The White House, 2011) and to act on the recommendation that working with military families should remain a program focus within Extension (Ames et al., 2011; Ferrari, 2005). By describing Ohio's experience, I hope to fill a gap in the literature regarding programs targeted to this audience. Going forward, Ohio will continue to use the camp format to engage military families. Although it certainly not the only way to reach military families, we recommend that others consider using this approach as well.

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