



Engaging Military Families in Home Visiting



Approximately 35 percent of active-duty service members have children, and more than 40 percent of those children are ages five and under.¹ Being part of a military family comes with many benefits, including access to educational assistance programs, discounts on goods and services, travel and adventure, and the unique bond of being part of the military community. Yet military families, including families led by active-duty service members and veterans, also face a variety of unique stressors that can affect both the physical and emotional health of their children.

Home visiting programs are uniquely positioned to help military families address these challenges by supporting caregivers and young children and connecting them with needed services. Yet, while MIECHV legislation has prioritized the engagement and support of military families,² awardees often find it challenging to do so. Moreover, research suggests that home visiting services are underutilized by military families even when they are available.³

This resource will highlight the unique stressors faced by military families, explore some of the challenges of engaging

- <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Infographic/2020-demographics-active-duty-families.pdf>
- https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title05/0511.htm
- https://www.hvresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/harc_brief_militaryfam.pdf

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.



[Visit the MIECHV Program website to learn more!](#)

military families in home visiting programs, and provide tips and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Unique Stressors

Military families face all of the same challenges as civilian families—juggling work and home life, parenting issues, financial concerns—as well as additional stressors associated with the nature of their employment.

- **Frequent relocation:** For active-duty military families, frequent relocation is a normal part of military life: military families move approximately every two to three years—three times more often than the average civilian family. These regular disruptions can be stressful for parents, who must repeatedly navigate new communities and cultures, as well as for their children, who must continually make new friends. Frequent moves also make it difficult for families to become integrated into their communities and learn about available services. (While military-focused programs do exist on-site at military bases, families living off base may have difficulty accessing these supports.) In addition, frequent relocation also denies families the long-term relationships and connections that can help mitigate the risk of mental health issues, leaving military families at greater risk for issues such as depression, substance use, and domestic violence.⁴
- **Deployment:** Parent deployment can produce feelings of loneliness and abandonment in children,⁵ as well as raise very real fears of a parent being injured or dying; military families are at increased risk of experiencing trauma related to the death of loved one, traumatic separation, and combat-related injuries.⁶



4 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK572092/>

5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3156864/>

6 https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/understanding_child_trauma_and_resilience_for_military_parents_and_caregivers.pdf

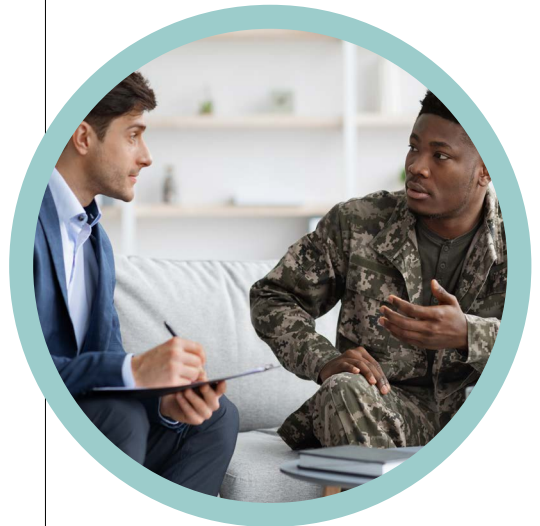
- **Youth:** Military families are getting younger. Slightly more than half of all active-duty service members are under the age of twenty-five when they have their first child, with most of these service members at the lowest pay grades.^{7,8} These factors increase the risk of child maltreatment, as well as intimate partner violence.⁹

Veteran families face different but equally pronounced stressors. Veterans must meet the challenges associated with transitioning back into civilian life—including but not limited to reconnecting emotionally with friends and family, redefining their sense of purpose, adjusting to civilian culture, and finding rewarding employment. Veterans are also more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance misuse, and approximately 13 percent of the adult homeless population are veterans.¹⁰

Challenges to Engaging Military Families in Home Visiting

Home visiting programs are well positioned to support military families as they address these unique stressors, yet many struggle to do so. Factors that often stand in the way include the following:

- **Limited knowledge of military culture:** Military culture encompasses a broad array of norms and behaviors that dictate how military service members, and their families, operate in the world (see sidebar on following page). Programs and providers on base understand military culture and the distinct challenges of military life; those working off base often do not. Service members or veterans who feel misunderstood may be reluctant to seek support off base, and home visiting staff with limited knowledge of military culture may be less successful in



7 <https://branchta.org/military-families-growing-younger/>

8 <https://nieer.org/press-release/few-states-provide-pre-k-for-children-with-parent-on-military-active-duty>

9 https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R46097.html#_Toc26437786

10 <https://nchv.org/veteran-homelessness/>

breaching the cultural divide and connecting with potential service recipients.¹¹

- **Frequent relocation (part 2):** Military families who anticipate frequent relocation may be reluctant to sign on to a multiyear home visiting commitment. Knowing that the care and support they receive will be interrupted, they may be disinclined to even begin.
- **Oversight and lack of integration:** While approximately 70 percent of military families live off base, there are few systems in place (e.g., through schools) to systematically identify them.¹² In addition, while on-base services often work in partnership with one another, creating a broad network of support, families who live off base may find that community-based services are less integrated and more difficult to locate.
- **Stigma and confidentiality concerns:** Over the past decade, the US military has made a concerted effort to reduce mental health stigma. Despite these efforts, many service members are still reluctant to seek mental health supports. Confidentiality concerns, combined with fears of being perceived as “weak,” often prevent service members and their families from accessing available mental health and child support services. Some service members may also be afraid that engaging with these services will affect their careers, since commanding officers are routinely notified when families access these supports on base. Some families may also worry that accessing services on base for their children may affect where they will be transferred. Families who have children with special needs are required to enroll in the Exceptional Family Member program. However, some families choose not to enroll because a child’s needs are then considered in future assignments, which can limit options for the service member.¹³

11 https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR806/RAND_RR806.pdf

12 <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/719407/military-children-serve-too/>

13 <http://www.eparent.com/features-3/relocation-pcs-for-military-families-with-children-of-special-needs/>

Understanding Military Culture

Just as home visitors must consider the unique culture of any racial or ethnic group with whom they work, so too must they consider military culture when working with military families. Military culture influences all aspects of military life, including how service members dress, the language they use, and how they behave at work. It can also influence how they act at home. Understanding the values and norms inherent in military culture can help home visitors provide the most appropriate support and referrals for military families. More information on military culture and military cultural competence can be found in [Understanding Military Culture](#).

- **Limited availability of programs geared toward military families:** While many home visiting programs have elements that would benefit military families, such as those focused on preventing domestic abuse and child maltreatment, only the Parents as Teachers model includes a curriculum specific to military families. As such, this is the only MIECHV-approved model that explicitly considers military culture and/or the unique needs of military families in its design.
- **Limited coordination between community and military services:** Military programs are not always aware of services in the community that welcome military families, and families who seek services on base will most likely be referred to programs on base. This can leave families who prefer to seek support off base uncertain of where to turn. They may feel responsible for finding programs on their own but are unsure if they are welcome.

Strategies for Engaging Military-Involved Families

Engaging military families in home visiting services is a multistep process that begins with identifying military-connected families but also includes partnership development, learning about military culture, and the provision of culturally competent and trauma-informed services. Strategies for connecting with military families include the following:

- **Connect with on-base providers.** Establishing a strong relationship with on-base health-care providers and/or the base's family advocacy coordinator (responsible for on-base education and prevention programs and connecting military families to resources) is perhaps the most important strategy for engaging military families. These relationships provide a channel for communicating about available services, and for building credibility and trust. On-base home visiting



Dedicate Time to Relationship-Building

Remember that partnership development takes time. Maintain regular contact and keep partners apprised of any changes to your services. Trust is key in these relationships. Once lost, it is hard to get back. Also try to establish more than one on-base connection as these positions are often filled by military spouses who are likely to move on when their spouse is relocated.

champions are also more likely to refer families off base, and referrals that come directly from on-base providers often carry more weight with families.

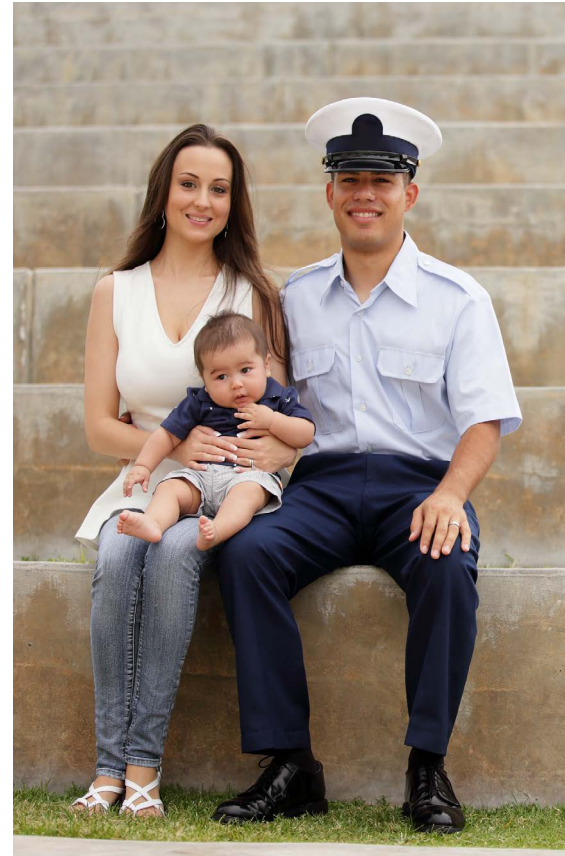
- **Screen for military involvement.** Include on home visiting intake screening forms questions to determine military involvement. The American Academy of Nursing suggests the following as the first intake question: “Have you or has someone close to you ever served in the military?”¹⁴ Families may not volunteer this information on their own, either because they have concerns about confidentiality or eligibility, or because they may not think it is relevant.
- **Coordinate with community partners.** Strong community partnerships can help LIAs identify eligible military families. They can also raise awareness of available home visiting services. Some key partners include:
 - *Veterans service organizations (VSOs), such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Veterans, and Disabled American Veterans:* These partners can help home visiting programs connect with veteran families that may be searching for community supports outside of those offered by VSOs.
 - *Head Start:* Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, K-12 schools are required to ask families about their military involvement using the Military Student Identifier (MSI). Many Head Start and other parenting support programs implement a version of the MSI, so they may be aware of military families living in the area.
 - *Family-serving organizations:* Connect with other organizations in the community that work with military families and have established relationships, such as WIC, United Way, 4-H clubs, and the Red Cross. Many of these groups host events on base.



14 <https://www.haveyoueverserved.com/intake-questions.html>

Local organizations that offer programs for parents and young children, such as the YMCA, local libraries, or museums, also attract young families that may be eligible for home visiting services. Basically, any location or event that attracts young families can be a place to connect. Farmers markets and even local barbershops (active service members are always getting haircuts!) can be a successful way to identify and engage military families in need of services.

- *Local support groups:* Word of mouth is a powerful force in the military. Within this close-knit community, parents rely on one another for information, advice, and support. To tap these connections, connect with local support groups, such as meetup groups for military moms and support groups for military spouses. It can also be helpful to advertise your services through social media (e.g., group or base-related Facebook pages) and/or by attending local meetings.
- **Take steps to ensure that military families feel safe, understood, and welcomed.** These include:
 - Ensuring that staff are well-versed in and respectful of military culture, including how the military is structured (e.g., branches and ranks, including differences unique to each branch), how it operates (e.g., length of trainings, frequency of deployment, and frequent relocation), and military dynamics. For example, families may become more protective of service members' privacy, especially as they move up the ranks, making them more concerned about confidentiality and their careers and less likely to reach out for help. Community programs that do not understand military culture may be viewed with skepticism by military families.



- Hiring staff that are ex-military or military spouses. There are benefits to having people on staff to whom military families can relate. Families will naturally feel more comfortable when staff can speak the language of military culture and understand, firsthand, issues unique to their experience.
- Communicating to families that off-base home visiting programs do not report participation to commanding officers. This may ease fears related to stigma and confidentiality.
- Providing clear messaging in outreach materials that military families are welcome.
- **Build on what we know works.** Military families are first and foremost families, so there are many aspects of home visiting programs from which they can benefit. However, there are opportunities to build on what we know works to make these programs even more relevant and accessible to military families. For example:
 - Honor military culture by recognizing the unique experiences of military families and providing support in the context of those experiences.
 - Engage clinical staff in preparing home visitors to address some of the unique disruptions, mental health issues, and/or traumatic events that military families may experience.
 - Implement innovative programs such as the New Parent Support program, Strong Families Strong Forces, and Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS). These programs were developed specifically for military families and address issues such as parenting in the context of deployment and reintegration, and preventing domestic abuse. More information can be found in the National Home Visiting Resource Center's [Home Visiting for Military Families: An Overview of Innovative Programs](#).



- Work with referral partners to identify and assess the effectiveness of supports they currently provide to military families.
- **Employ a trauma-informed approach to care.** Trauma is not necessarily a part of all military families' experiences. However, awardees and LIAs should be prepared to support those for whom it is. Each family should be considered individually and supported as needed, without preconceived notions of what the family may have experienced.
- **Ensure continuity of care.** Frequent relocation may prevent military families who are participating in home visiting programs from receiving services for the full program duration. Programs can provide continuity by helping families transition their home visiting care when they move to a new location. One way to do this is by providing a "warm handoff"—that is, by individually connecting them with a home visitor or home visiting liaison in their new location. This personal connection can help build trust with the new home visitor. A direct handoff from one home visitor to another can also prevent a disruption in services that often occurs when a family is left to navigate their new community on their own.
- **Provide ongoing professional development.** Offering training and resources can prepare home visitors and other LIA staff to better engage military families. Training topics might include:
 - Military culture, including aspects of military culture that might influence family dynamics or help-seeking behavior, and biases/assumptions about military life and families that may affect care.
 - Unique challenges/stressors faced by military families and strategies for reducing the impact of these stressors on young children.

A Trauma-Informed Approach

SAMHSA has developed a framework for understanding what a trauma-informed approach is. It includes recognizing the signs, symptoms, and impact of trauma and incorporating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

For more information, see [*Implementing Trauma-Informed Approaches in Home Visiting.*](#)

- Effects of military-related trauma, including types of military-related trauma, how trauma might affect parenting, and strategies for addressing the effects of trauma. Trainings should also acknowledge that trauma is *not* part of all military families' experiences.

Conclusion

Cultural competence—that is, the ability of an individual or organization to understand and interact effectively with people who have different values, lifestyles, and traditions—is central to the delivery of quality home visiting services. Understanding and respecting cultural norms is key to building rapport, establishing trust, and mitigating biases that can influence relationships and impact the effectiveness of services. Just as home visitors strive to understand the diverse populations with which they work, so too must they seek to understand and respect the norms, traditions, and realities of military culture. Understanding this culture, and providing supports that are consistent with it, is the foundation for an effective response and the delivery of quality services.

Special thanks to the University of Georgia Muscogee County Cooperative Extension Healthy Families Georgia program and the Hawaii Home Visiting Program at the Hawaii State Department of Health for their valuable input into the development of this resource.



Resources

[After Service: Veteran Families in Transition](#)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Presents challenges faced by veteran families, questions for providers to ask when supporting these families, and resources for working with this population.

[Have You Ever Served?](#)

American Academy of Nursing

Encourages health-care providers to ask about patients' military backgrounds in order to identify potential service-related health factors and improve the overall health of veterans.

[Home Visiting for Military Families: An Overview of Innovative Programs](#)

National Home Visiting Resource Center

Describes four programs that provide services to military families.

[Military and Veteran Families Support](#)

ZERO TO THREE

Provides resources and tools for use with military and veteran families around supporting young children.

[Psych/Armor](#)

Provides education and training to help civilians better understand military culture and engage with and support service members. Some resources include:

- [15 Things Veterans Want You to Know](#)
- [Veteran 101: Officer vs. Enlisted](#)
- [Why Collaboration Is So Important in Supporting Military Members, Veterans, Their Families, and Caregivers](#)

[Understanding Military Culture](#)

American Psychological Association Practice Organization

Provides information and resources for mental health professionals and others who work with military populations on military culture and cultural competence.

[Understanding the Military: The Institution, the Culture, and the People](#)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Provides information about military life and culture. It is geared toward behavioral health-care specialists but is useful for anyone looking to better understand the military.

References

American Academy of Nursing, *Intake Questions: Have You Ever Served?*

<https://www.haveyoueverserved.com/intake-questions.html>.

The Branch (MPTAC), *Military Families: "Growing" Younger!* (Tacoma, WA: The Branch).

Department of Defense, *2020 Demographics Profile: Active-Duty Families*.

Esposito-Smythers, C., J. Wolff, K. M. Lemmon, M. Bodzy, R. R. Swenson, and A. Spirito, "Military Youth and the Deployment Cycle: Emotional Health Consequences and Recommendations for Intervention," *Journal of Family Psychology* 25, no. 4 (2011): 497-507.

Garamone, J., *Military Children Serve, Too*, April 12, 2016 (DOD News).

Inoue, C., E. Shawler, C. H. Jordan, and C. A. Jackson, "Veteran and Military Mental Health Issues," (StatPearls Publishing: 2021).

Kamarck, K. N., A. Ott, and L. N. Sacco, *Military Families and Intimate Partner Violence: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

Kluge, S., A. McElhenny, and G. Leskin, *Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: For Military Parents and Caregivers* (Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, 2020).

Morrison, C., M. Sparr, and S. Ramsook, *Implementing Trauma-Informed Approaches in Home Visiting* (Arlington, VA: James Bell Associates, National Home Visiting Resource Center Research Snapshot Brief, May 2020).

National Institute for Early Education Research, "Few States Provide Pre-K for Children with Parent on Military Active Duty," press release, 2019.

"Relocation ('PCS') for Military Families with Children of Special Needs," *eParent*, June 27, 2019.

Ross, A., A. Belknap, K. O'Neill, and J. Landsverk, *Home Visiting Program Readiness to Serve Military Families with Very Young Children* (Home Visiting Applied Resource Collaborative, 2015).

Social Security Administration, *Compilation of the Social Security Laws*.

Tanielian, T., C. Farris, C. Batka, C. M. Farmer, E. Robinson, C. C. Engel, M. W. Robbins, and L. H. Jaycox, *Ready to Serve: Community-Based Provider Capacity to Deliver Culturally Competent, Quality Mental Health Care to Veterans and Their Families* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

"Veteran Homelessness," *The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans*,
<https://nchv.org/veteran-homelessness/>.