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Alaska PTA
A Handbook for
Families and Education
Military Style

A New Initiative Grant from National PTA
made this handbook possible.

Foreword

We would like to express our thanks to the National PTA for the New Initiative Grant. Without this money, these workshops would not have happened.

We also would like to thank the families of the Kodiak Coast Guard Station, Ft. Wainwright (Army, Fairbanks) and Ft. Richardson (Army, Anchorage). These families were forthright, open and sharing with each other, and willing to express personal experiences to make this handbook a reality. They are committed to their families and their careers and were proud to speak out. These are the people that serve our country in one of the most visible and strenuous jobs in public service.

Methodology

Families came together for dinner or dessert, had childcare provided and spent the next two hours working in small groups to brainstorm and share ‘good practices’ that they had either experienced in another school system or would find it helpful if a school offered these options.

The responses were gathered into this handbook following the layout of the National Parent Standards to provide consistency. There are additional resources and research provided in the appendix of the handbook.

The handbook was distributed to the National PTA Board of Managers, State Presidents, every PTA unit in Alaska, Alaska Legislative members, Alaska Congressional Senators and Representatives, National Military Family Association, 53 Alaskan school districts and school boards, Alaska State Board of Education, Alaska Department of Education, with additional copies to the sites that participated in the workshops.

It has been my pleasure and honor to represent military families, as not only the Alaska State President, but also as an active duty spouse of 26 years and as a ‘military brat.’

Thank you to all who worked on this handbook.

Alaska PTA President, 1997-99

Paula Pawlowski

"If you want the best

EDUCATION

for your child . . .

GET INVOLVED!"

Alaska PTA

Parent involvement is the participation of parents in every facet of the education and development of children from birth to adulthood, recognizing that parents are the primary influence in children's lives.

The National PTA recognizes the research that demonstrates when parents are involved, student achieve more regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level. The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

1. create a home environment that encourages learning;
2. communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for their children's achievement and future careers and;
3. become involved in their children's education and in the community.

In this time of changing family structures, a simple definition of 'family' is no longer available. Married couples, single parents, blended families, sandwiched, co-parented, adoptive, grandparenting, emptynesters and families with adult children at home challenge our past definition of 'family.'

Another family structure has been studied very little and has long coped with behaving and looking different than the norm is the military family.

“By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.”

National Goal 8:

Parental Participation

Military Families are Special!

Institutions, educators, and social workers have long studied what it means to grow up military. The good news is that they consistently report that a military upbringing is no more stressful or debilitating than a civilian childhood. It just looks different.¹

According to the survey, the majority of respondents reported being healthy; engaging in weekly exercise; participating in appropriate school and community activities; doing homework and getting good grades in school. Furthermore, they recounted being happy with their school, home, and community environments. Comparisons with other studies, where available, revealed that military adolescents are doing at least as well, and in some cases slightly better, than their civilian peers on most of the indicators measured.

Educational Experiences of students as dependents

- Ranged from one to ten or more, the average being 5.15.
- Students overall grade point average was 3.03.
- A large percentage reported positive interaction with teachers, a small percentage said that teachers put down students.
- Negative school behaviors most frequently reported were being late and breaking the rules.
- The majority of youth reported feeling safe at school.
- A large percentage indicated that their parents were actively involved in their education by checking homework, helping with homework, and rewarding good grades. However, three-fourths said that their parents limited privileges because of poor grades at least one point in time.

¹ Military Life, April 1995, Growing Up Military . . . Kids Speak Up, Sabra Chartrand, Out of Print

“Trying to educate children without the involvement of their family is like trying to play a basketball game without all the players on the court.”

Senator Bill Bradley
New Jersey

The students’ **relationship with their family** of course varies

- Family satisfaction was related to family structure. Adolescent living with one parent and one stepparent had the lowest family satisfaction.
- Slightly over one quarter reported parental use of physical punishment.
- Family satisfaction was related to whether or not their parent used physical punishment. Satisfaction was highest among those who were not physically punished.

Differences between military series

- Air Force youths reported fewer risk factors.
- Navy youths appeared to be most at risk.
- Adolescents living overseas were found to be more at risk than those living stateside.
- OCONUS youth seemed to have greater potential for obtaining support since they lived more often on base or post.
- Air Force youths were least likely to have ever smoked cigarettes, used drugs or alcohol.
- Navy youths, on average scored lower than the other three services on the Index of Psychological well being.
- More Army families than other service families reported living in military housing on and off base, living overseas, and moving often.
- Army fathers were more often separated from their children than other groups.
- Air Force adolescents had the most positive perception of opportunities the military offers its members.

Studies of individual families show that what the family does is more important to student success than family income or education.

New Worries

With the military services moving to an all-volunteer force in 1973, the personnel make up changed. During the Vietnam War, only about 15 percent of active-duty men and women were married with children. Today, more than 60% of the volunteer force have families, with the biggest jump in married status occurring among the enlisted personnel. A third of military women are parents.

Some of military life today is the same as before, such as: cookie-cutter base housing, moving, and parents frequent absence possibly to missions from which he or she might not return.

Studies once showed that military children rarely worried that Dad might lose his job. Downsizing and cutbacks to benefits and entitlements have changed that. Reports of abuse and incest are up, and racial integration still challenges the services.

Many children today grapple with concerns their predecessors didn't dream of. They fear losing both mother and father in dual-military career families to dangerous assignments. Deployment for single parent families means children must be left in the care of friends or relatives.

Operation Desert Storm was the first war in which many mothers, single parents, and dual-career personnel left children. In the Army alone, about 17,000 single mothers and fathers were forced to leave their kids with surrogate parents.²

² Military Life, April 1995, Growing Up Military . . . Kids Speak Up, Sabra Chartrand, Out of Print

Many of the most effective parent-school partnership programs combine multiple strategies.

Strong Families,
Strong Schools
U.S. Department of
Education

Military Families and Involvement

Involvement with the schools and education system is a necessity for military parents. Every time the family moves to a new location there are many unknowns that must be dealt with.

Technical school issues such as graduation requirements, discipline, school dress codes, rules and regulations for both students and families, along with locating help to meet the individual needs of students are some of the issues that must be dealt with.

Social issues must be addressed; teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, gang-related activity, youth violence, and community cultures are a few of the challenges.

Instinct alone will not help parents with the transition. School systems must help military families adjust. Parents need to learn the climate of the school and establish strong communication with not only teachers, but also school support staff.

As families enter a new society there are advantages and disadvantages which workshop participants highlight in this report. Some barriers may seem larger than others but if there is meaningful parent/family involvement there is always a process to allow solutions to be found. Just as your family has it's own system during a move many branches of the services have systems in place to help the members readjust and cope with a change of duty station but dependent members may not be as fortunate.

Remember: Parents are not re-stationed at convenient times or school schedules; including the traditional volunteer luncheon. Find ways to say thank you throughout the year.

There are many **Road Blocks for Military Families** beyond the normal difficulties those families' experiences with the school system. These are some that were brainstormed but what was interesting is that the list was virtually the same among all three groups.

- Lack of time – it may only be a two year assignment
- Others don't understand the military system
- Language and cultural differences
- Not feeling welcome
- Not knowing where to go for help
- Families not asking for help
- Information isn't shared
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Active duty member gone a lot
- Reverse roles, mom is now the active duty person
- Far away from family support
- Changing churches, jobs, schools
- Lack of continuity in health care
- Financial hardships because of moving
- Spouses have continual job instability
- Feelings of isolation
- Taking a long time to have your voice heard
- Pay benefits are reduced according to duty station
- Arrive to 'cliques'
- Limited extra-curricular activities varying from location to location
- School records are different at each location
- School records not arriving in a timely manner yet parents are not allowed to hand carry
- Different starting ages for kindergarten
- Kindergarten is optional not mandatory in some states
- Not knowing what the educational system offers until after arriving
- Gifted and talented testing is not the same from state to state
- Graduation requirements are different
- Clubs are not the same
- Curriculum disconnects, gaps

The role of parents in the education of their children cannot be overestimated. By becoming involved in their local school community, parents can provide the essential leadership, which will lead to improvements in educational opportunities for their children.

Mexican American
Legal Defense and
Educational Fund

- Misunderstanding about the military lifestyle
- Too much volunteering can hurt the family structure
- Waiting for base housing can cause another school change for children
- Erasing benefits
- High divorce rate

Strategies for Schools

If families are not the consistent factor in the equation then the school becomes the stable factor. So how can schools help?

By following the model set out in the National Parent Standards, schools can set up support systems to help all families that have challenges, not just military families. Research results are important because they indicate that caring communities can be built, purposefully, to include families that might not become involved on their own because of circumstances or structure.

Families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools and communities to remain good partners in their children's education.

At every workshop, Kodiak, Fairbanks, and Anchorage, parents brainstormed in small groups' suggestions that either have been present at previous duty stations or ideas that would be helpful for military families. Then the ideas are arranged in the categories of the six definitions of parent involvement.

One of the advantages/disadvantages of being a military family is that you do drop in and out of several different types of educational philosophies. Local control is important to communities but it does not translate into consistency for children.

Communication Between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

Standard I:
Communicating
National Parent Standards

Six Types of Parent/Family Involvement

Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful is the definition used by the National Parent Standards.

Communication is the foundation of a solid partnership. Too often, communication is only one way and/or only when there is a problem. When a relationship is developed before there is a problem, communication allows for partnerships to work towards solutions.

- Newsletters from individual teachers
- Creating school liaisons
- Response journal by students, read by parents
- Homework diaries
- Behavioral cards for children with recurring behavioral patterns
- Newsletter from principal
- Fliers
- Packet that goes home on the same day each week
- Workshops for parents to highlight upcoming changes'
- 800#s for school information
- Utilizing home pages or websites
- E-mail
- Child receives incentive awards for returning information
- Student shadow days
- Rip & Run, an opinion collection page in the school newsletter (parents fill out information, rips it from the paper and returns it to the school).

Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

Standard II: Parenting
National Parent Standards

Parenting skills are as diverse as the people themselves and not just in the military. From making sure that students arrive at school rested, fed, and ready to learn, to setting high learning expectations and nurturing self-esteem parents sustain their children's learning. Respect for how the family operates, looks and interacts needs to be respected by the educational system. Without understanding the challenges and difficulties of the military family, schools cannot respond to the needs of the children.

- Parenting classes at school
- Peer helpers to help counsel children when communication is poor with parents (middle school, high school age)
- Developmental seminars for parents
- Academic refreshers for parents
- Speakers on parenting skills
- Parenting information in newsletter
- Welcoming committee for new parents
- Meet the staff nights
- Orientation for civilian teachers
- Free limited childcare for parents that volunteer
- Book clubs for parents
- Offering classes dealing with issues surrounding moving (grief, anger, disappointment)
- Counseling for separation and coming home issues
- Set up 'contact friends' who have gone through similar situations

Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

Standard III:
Student Learning
National Parent Standards

Learning at Home is difficult without a clear knowledge of what is happening at school. Most parents are willing to assist their students in learning but usually are not sure what assistance is most helpful. When children were smaller, it was easier to know when children are successful. First steps, tying shoelaces, making their bed are easily demonstrated and visible. Not so easy to see for parents are the achievable moments in the classroom and this is even more difficult if those classrooms are spaced from state to state.

- Homework hotlines
- Title I and Literacy programs
- Mentors (for parents, students to students)
- After school tutoring
- Student government
- Weapons and violence prevention information
- Educational activities to do as the family travels from duty station to the new assignment
- Brochures, maps
- Help to have a standard time and place to accomplish homework
- Recognize special areas of expertise of parents
- Utilize the knowledge of students vast moving (some children have ‘on the job’ experience in areas of history, language, and cultures)

Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

Standard IV: Volunteering
National Parent Standards

Volunteering capitalizes on the expertise and skills of parents and adds to the broad base of knowledge that a school has access to on a daily basis. For military families, the school is many times the first relationship developed by the family in a new community. Waiting for household goods to arrive, waiting to start a new job, adjusting to the new climate or just trying to not miss previous friends, the school can be a refuge. Volunteer positions can also promote skills that can be translated into future jobs or references.

- Providing cooperative child care for volunteer program
- Open communication channels between teachers and volunteers
- Training for volunteers
- Advance notice for volunteers so work schedules can be arranged with superiors
- Welcoming everyone
- Having a Program or Plan for volunteers
- Providing rewards and recognition
- Volunteer coordinator for each class
- Parents helping parents
- Remembering that military services allow parents and non-parents time off to volunteer
- Including information about school history
- Time for teachers to get to know parents
- Active PTAs
- Having a menu of volunteer activities to match work schedules
- Producing a handbook of volunteer opportunities for parents
- Providing for volunteers year long recognition because transfer assignments happen all year

Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

Standard V:
School Decision Making
and Advocacy
National Parent Standards

Decision Making and shared authority of parents or as representatives of others, communicate that parents are valued. Parents and educators depend on shared authority in decision-making systems to foster parental trust, public confidence, and mutual support of each other's efforts in helping students succeed.

- Encourage the structure of the PTA, families are familiar with that structure
- Report cards should include a place for parental input
- Allow for telephone 'call-ins' at school board meetings
- Get regular parent input all year long
- Have Title I parent contracts
- Include parents on boundary, curriculum, and principal selection committees
- People with power (administration i.e. superintendents, principals, teachers) need to share information
- Schools need to respect the family
- Active parent models i.e. site based councils

Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

Standard VI:
Collaborating with
Community
National Parent Standards

Collaboration with the Community members strengthen partnerships which benefit the students and families. Bases should be considered as a community partner in addition to local business.

Making shared information about resources, recreation, academic, health, and cultural events build a feeling of community faster, which directly benefits families who move frequently.

- Services encourage student tours in places of work (i.e. Coast Guard open houses on board ships)
- Allow children to parade through public buildings
- Promote camping trips for certain grades (5th and 6th)
- Create Parent Academy classes (parenting skills)
- Promote back to school picnics
- Include parents on Community Action Committees
- D.A.R.E. programs
- Conduct parent tours
- Connect with Youth Services
- Have incentive awards (Clever Fox) and if you are caught; you get lunch with the principal
- Have ‘partnerships’ with military ‘divisions’ or ‘units’
- Create ‘partner pages’ in base papers
- Invite partners into the school for picnics, conferences, etc.

So what are the advantages of military families and school partnerships?

The Strengths of the Military Family appear in many ways to reflect the skills that business people ask for their employees to know. Although many families felt that communities looked at military families as a drain upon local resources; families felt they had a lot more to offer than at first glance.

- Independent adults and children
- Thrifty
- Creates a community ‘extended family’
- Tend to volunteer more because of the military mission
- Flexible, adaptable
- Families are quick to bond
- Members get to re-invent who you are with each move
- Children are exposed to other languages and customs
- Children receive ‘hands on’ history
- Bases are perceived as “safer communities’ than off base
- There are support groups available on base
- Families live in a multi-cultural atmosphere at work, school, housing areas, and play
- Military members receive paid travel during a reassignment
- Children learn to make new friends easily
- The military lifestyle helps folks remain open minded
- Every family member can receive medical care
- Children and families have access to youth activities
- The family receives either a housing allowance or housing unit
- The active duty sponsor has more paid holidays than civilians, 3-4 day passes and annually 30 days paid leave
- Bases maintain a military police force
- Adults have access to educational benefits
- Families have access to military childcare
- There is a variety of recreation opportunities i.e. hunting, fishing, camping, physical fitness centers
- Children grow up with a global view of life
- Families have a secure paycheck

- The military lifestyle can create closer knit families
- Children have well developed social skills for different situations
- Children are exposed to skills that are promoted in the “School to Work” programs closer and sooner.

The “Forbidden Subject”

The issue of ‘rank’ appeared again and again from workshop attendees but always apologetically. Hesitantly but persistently, incident after incident was recited. Defending their service but inequities in housing, schools, and respect were reported.

Once again, if all children are to be equally treated in our public school system, schools may have to be the facilitator and equalizer for families.

They will need to recognize that the military system is trying to make strides in the private lives of military families but their entire history and current system is based upon merit and ranking and all *not* being equal.

Whether real or unreal inequities, when families feel there may be a consequence of speaking out to the ‘education system’ may affect their job security then the school will need to address these concerns.

Some tips for eliminating rank differences for a school population are to:

- Make buttons for volunteers that say “Sally’s Dad” or “Sally’s Mom”
- Always make reference to their job not their rank
- Use first names or Mr. and Mrs. (remember they are active duty military . . . not you)
- Have parents sit down at tables together
- Do ‘icebreaker’ activities instead of introducing (i.e. My child is proud of . . .)
- Don’t have parents put in the position of testifying in front of higher ranking officers. Find a neutral party to collect opinions
- Remember that families are concerned about the long term educational issues. Just because they are short term doesn’t mean they do not care.

Many thanks to the parents who attended the workshops and contributed their many experiences. It is our wish that this work is not finished but that connecting schools and parents, whatever the family structure, will continue in a proactive manner.