

Supporting Military-Connected Students with Visual Impairments

Katie Ericson, M.Ed. Mary Tubbs, M.Ed.

As of October 2021, students enrolled in Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools averaged scale scores that were 10 to 18 percent higher than the United States' average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments (DoDEA, 2021). The DoDEA schools were designed in a partnership between the Departments of Defense and Education with an emphasis on both academics and family support (DoDEA, 2021). Unfortunately, higher test scores belie the unique stressors and challenges inherent in being a military-connected student.

Military-connected family members may experience multiple deployments or temporary duty (TDY) assignments, extended deployments, and/or frequent relocations (Classen et al., 2019). Frequent relocations can result in disruptions to educational and medical services as well as family support systems (Classen et al., 2019; DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). Thus, service providers and educators may be in a unique position to support families and provide continuity of care.

As of 2020, approximately 1.3 million military-connected students attended schools in the United States (U.S.) and abroad (Capp et al., 2017; DoDEA, n.d.). Of these, approximately 90,000 military-connected children are enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), which supports military dependents who require special medical, behavioral, and/or educational services (Aronson et al., 2016). While there are no definitive numbers regarding students with visual impairments, 1.5% of respondents in a 2021 military family survey identified themselves as parents of a child with a visual impairment (Barnhill et al., 2021). Thus, teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and orientation & mobility (O&M) specialists may serve one or more military-connected students with visual impairments during their careers, especially if they serve a school near a military installation or work for DoDEA.

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What Vision Professionals Should Know

While each military-connected family possesses unique strengths and needs, military-connected students have also been identified as vulnerable learners due to culture-specific stressors (Barnhill, 2023). The average active-duty military family will move every one to four years, both within the continental U.S. (CONUS) and outside the continental U.S. (OCONUS; DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). As a result, parents must frequently learn to navigate new special education and medical systems. Additionally, the quality and availability of educational services may vary (Aronson et al., 2016). For example, students living on or near rural military installations may not receive regular O&M services.

Resources may be similarly scarce when families move OCONUS (Burrow, 2023). Smaller military installations may have limited access to specialized medical services, meaning that families must access these on the local economy, often with the assistance of a translator (Burrow, 2023). Even larger installations may only have an optometrist available, rather than a pediatric ophthalmologist. The lack of appropriate specialists and the cultural differences in medical treatment may create delays in major medical appointments for families overseas, requiring them to instead wait until they can coordinate time and resources to travel to CONUS.

While OCONUS, students with visual impairments often attend DoDEA schools, which are located on military installations and provide instruction in English, using an American curriculum (DoDEA, 2021). However, students with visual impairments attending DoDEA schools also face challenges. They may receive the majority of their educational services via distance consultation that is moderated by a case manager, a counselor, or, occasionally, a parent. For example, students in Spain may be served by a TVI in Italy or Germany.

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) often compounds these challenges. Military family members (also known as dependents) enroll in EFMP if they have any special medical or educational needs (e.g., visual impairment, deafblindness, etc.). Enrollment in EFMP is designed to prevent families from being sent to locations that cannot accommodate their needs (Davis & Finke, 2015). For example, a family of a student with a visual impairment who requires braille instruction would be given preference at a larger installation overseas that hosts a TVI/O&M specialist. In theory, EFMP enrollment helps guide relocation without impeding career advancement or professional opportunities. A study conducted by the Marine Corps Operations Analysis Directorate determined that EFMP enrollment does not have a negative effect on career advancement, but anecdotal reports show continued hesitancy from military-connected parents (Operations Analysis Directorate, 2016). If

parents have concerns that go beyond workplace assurances, they may be tempted to delay or deny special education services so as not to affect EFMP (and, ultimately, where they are stationed). In a 2022 analysis of military-family responses to EFMP, 65% said that participation in the program increased their stress levels, and 25% of respondents said that they were unlikely to continue their military service due to the impact of EFMP involvement (Barnhill, 2023). Thus, a student may not receive the special education services needed, or these services may abruptly change immediately prior to relocation.

What Vision Professionals Can Do

School curricula, including scope and sequence, can vary greatly between locations. In contrast, TVIs and O&M specialists work from a field-based curriculum with consistent benchmarks. The field consistency can allow a smooth transition between service providers and maintain a level of stability when other realms of academic and non-academic life are changing. TVIs and O&M specialists can also serve as vital supports and advocates for military families and their children, both in and out of the classroom.

Build Positive Relationships with Students and Families

Military families and their children may lack immediate, more traditional support systems. Additionally, relocations and deployments cause extensive strain, even among experienced families, and military-connected students are at higher risk for social and psychological disorders (Classen et al., 2019; DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). Research results have shown that positive relationships can serve as a buffer for children during traumatic times (Classen et al., 2019). While perhaps not a traditional support system, TVIs and O&M specialists should build positive, trusting relationships with parents and students that can help sustain them through deployments and TDYs.

The key components of trusting relationships are collaboration and communication. Regular communication with the family ensures that the TVI/O&M specialist is aware of current needs and concerns, such as a family member's deployment or extended TDY. The TVI/O&M specialist can then act as a liaison to share information with the team to meet family needs, schedule meetings around the TDY or deployment, provide additional support(s) for the student, or plan lessons with these needs in mind. Resources like the Military Child Well-being Toolkit (Military Child Education Coalition, n.d.) can easily be integrated into the expanded core curriculum (ECC) and can guide the development of individualized education program (IEP) goals across service areas. The toolkit includes handouts, charts, and videos for parents, professionals, schools, and children, and it covers topics such as post-traumatic stress

disorder, suicide prevention, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness. A TVI might use the toolkit's resources to help a student develop a stress management plan, whereas an O&M specialist might teach breathing exercises and mindfulness before introducing new and, perhaps, stressful concepts. Above all, the TVI and/or O&M specialist should use the toolkit to help promote social-emotional development and implement wellness activities.

Assist Parents in the Search for Resources

As noted previously, resources often vary between installations and communities, so relocation often entails learning what services are available and how to access them. Families with active-duty members of lower rank or fewer years of service may be especially affected by these challenges. They may lack knowledge and experience due to their brevity of service, or they may not know whom to ask for assistance (Classen et al., 2019; DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). Many installations now have dedicated social media to help families adjust to new installations, but TVIs and O&M specialists should connect families with vision-specific local and/or online resources.

Use Culturally Responsive Practices

Each military-connected student with a visual impairment has unique strengths, needs, and experiences. Before starting assessments or planning instruction, it is especially important to talk with the student, as well as their parents/guardians and teachers, to gain insight regarding their background and experiences. TVIs and O&M specialists will want to incorporate some type of family cultural inventory into their interview processes, and the family's responses should be incorporated into lessons to the greatest extent possible (Coleman, 2019). Military-connected students may have lived their entire lives overseas, speak more than one language, and/or have unique cultural backgrounds and knowledge that may influence their responses to assessment and instruction. For example, during one O&M assessment, a student shared that he had lived overseas for most of his life, and as a result, he only had experience with vehicles driving on the left (rather than on the right, as in the U.S.). Service providers should use these assessment results to design culturally responsive instruction and foster ongoing collaboration with families (Coleman et al., 2022).

Additionally, some sources refer to military-connected families as their own cultural group (Esqueda et al., 2012). It is important for service providers to be aware of specific vocabulary, including branch terms (e.g., soldier, sailor, airman, Marine), degrees of involvement (active, reserve, guard), and types of military connections

(e.g., father, mother, sibling) (Classen et al., 2019). They also need to be aware of how family roles shift during deployments and how an internal change may affect a student's ability to engage effectively in school.

Maintain Routines and Expectations

Research studies that consider the lived experiences of military-connected students show increases in disruptive behaviors, academic work avoidance, and increased absenteeism during relocation or deployment (Capp et al., 2017; DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2011). Service providers must also be aware that deployment is not a singular status. In 2007, five stages were identified: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment, and post-deployment (Pincus, et al., 2007). Each stage has its own set of difficulties and should be approached delicately, allowing the student to take the lead.

While transitions and deployments will create additional stress, TVIs/O&M specialists can support a student by maintaining established routines to provide stability and a sense of normalcy for the student (DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). TVIs/O&M specialists can begin by modeling healthy habits and routines. Check-ins regarding how students are doing within a particular situation should be focused on them as individuals, without appearing to blame the military as the cause of their difficulties. TVIs/O&M specialists should maintain high expectations for students while also making allowances for family needs that are related to the stages of deployment and relocations.

Provide Detailed Supporting Documentation

When transitioning to new educational settings, IEPs or individualized family service plans (IFSPs) often serve as a primary mode of communication regarding a child's skills. A child's IEPs and/or related assessments may be the first exposure that a TVI or O&M specialist has to the child. Thus, assessments and IEPs/IFSPs should include sufficient detail to benefit providers in the next school so that services can be immediately and successfully implemented. IEP/IFSP goals should be clearly written and should include notes on how progress will be measured; when possible, TVIs/O&M specialists should include supporting documents and materials (DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). TVIs/O&M specialists should also provide copies of documentation (e.g., O&M assessments) to parents to hand carry to their next installation/location.

Reach Out to Specialists at Gaining Installations

The permanent change of station (PCS) process frequently begins far in advance of a move; some families will know their gaining installation and moving timeline 6

to 12 months ahead of time. In that time, TVIs/O&M specialists can, with parent permission, help complete the EFMP paperwork, reaching out to the installation EFMP coordinator as needed. TVIs/O&M specialists may also contact other service providers in the vicinity of the gaining installation to ensure a smooth transition (again, with parent permission).

Conclusion

Studies like that of Richardson et al. (2011) provide a thorough analysis of the multifaceted experiences of military-connected students, but they offer little information about students who receive special education services. The same can be said for other studies, including those discussed within this article. Researchers have begun to explore other elements of the military-connected student's special education experience; however, the focus has primarily been on early intervention services and students with high-incidence disabilities.

The authors analyzed available research with the specific needs of students with visual impairments in mind, drawing upon current research-based practices for students who are not military-connected as well as the authors' experiences working for DoDEA and attending DoDEA programs. The existing information is vital for professionals across the spectrum of school-based services, but additional research is needed to better understand the experiences of military-connected students with visual impairments, support their families, and identify more specific intervention models.

As further research is conducted, TVIs and O&M specialists can draw upon current research-based practices for students with visual impairments, trauma-informed practices, and a foundational understanding of the challenges that military-connected students face. When taking on new students, professionals should review student information to determine whether they are military-connected and what services they received at the previous location. They should also contact previous service providers whenever possible. In addition to providing a bridge between locations, TVIs and O&M specialists should take advantage of their flexibility to adjust to preexisting and changing circumstances to a degree that cannot be done by classroom teachers or group interventions. Professionals should not assume that all military-connected students are struggling mentally or emotionally, but they should be prepared for the possibility of past trauma, masking, internal volatility, or sudden changes in life circumstances. Above all, professionals should prioritize listening to the unique needs and concerns expressed by military-connected students and families while keeping in mind that there is always more to learn.

Table. Commonly used acronyms.

| Acronym | Term | Definition |
|---------|---|---|
| DoD | Department of Defense | U.S. government body overseeing the armed forces and military policy. |
| DoDEA | Department of Defense Education Activity | A federally-operated school system, under the guidance of the DoD, responsible for the education of eligible children ages 3 to 21. |
| EDIS | Educational and Developmental Intervention Services | The organization responsible for providing early intervention services to eligible children from birth to age 3. |
| EFMP | Exceptional Family Member Program | The DoD's mandatory enrollment-based program that supports the needs of military-connected families with disabilities or other health concerns. |
| PCS | Permanent Change of Station | A permanent move from one military base to another. |
| TDY | Temporary Duty Assignment | A special assignment at a location other than the service member's permanent duty station. |

Additional Resources

For more information, please visit the following websites:

- DoDEA: <https://www.dodea.edu/index.cfm>
- Military Child Education Coalition: <https://www.militarychild.org>
- Military OneSource: <https://efmpeducationdirectory.militaryonesource.mil>
- Partners in Promise: <https://thepromiseact.org>

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Katie Ericson, M.Ed., TVI, COMS, Doctoral Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; **Mary Tubbs**, M.Ed., TVI, State of New Hampshire.

Corresponding Author: Katie Ericson, email: kericson3@huskers.unl.edu.

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