

Military Child Suicide:

Prevention Techniques
and Best Practices

By Stacy Paskvan



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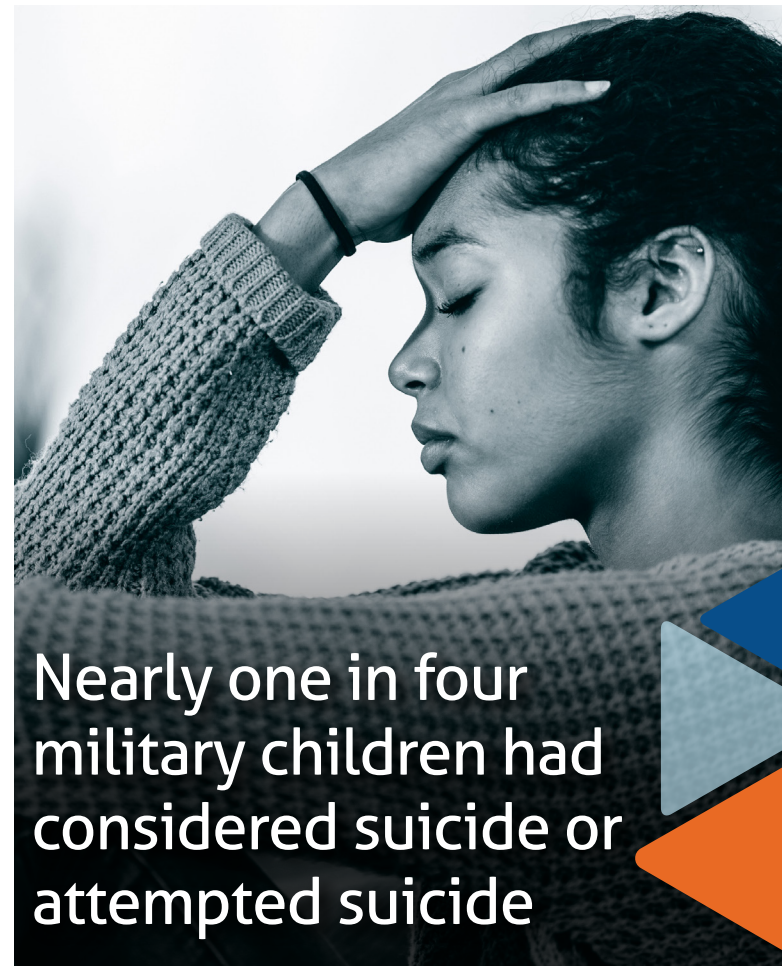
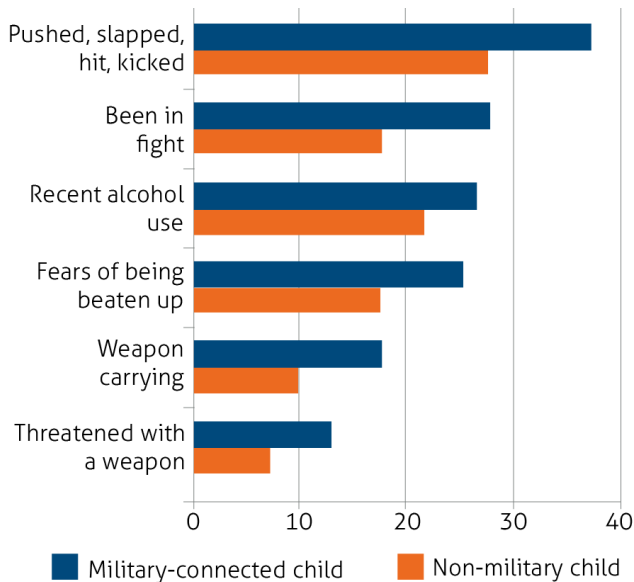
Defining the Problem

We celebrate military children for having resilient qualities—they can put down roots anywhere and they can adapt and survive. Hardy and tough, like their military parent counterpart, our military children are truly marvelous adapters.

There is no doubt that the military child is resilient, but there is still work to be done, especially when it comes to reducing military child suicide. Unfortunately, the numbers of American military children committing suicide is significant. In a study conducted in a California High School, nearly one in four military children had considered suicide or attempted suicide, a rate 10% higher than the civilian population at the same school ¹.

Magellan Federal believes further research is needed to understand this vulnerable population—a population that we care for intimately, each and every day. Our non-medical counselors support more than one million service members, veterans, and military youth family members each year. We have **more than 10 years of experience providing 1,400+ counselors in 182 locations**. We understand that military child suicide is an issue to be taken seriously, and offer expertise and resources to help parents, educators, and medical professionals deal with this pressing issue.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MILITARY- AND NON-MILITARY-CONNECTED YOUTH ²



Nearly one in four military children had considered suicide or attempted suicide

¹Kime, 2019; Rabb, 2022; Zarembo, 2015

²Jackson & North-Hager, 2015

Risk Factors

Being a military child brings many amazing opportunities, but also higher risks for a range of problems compared to the non-military-connected child. Some of these problems include illegal drug use, alcohol use/abuse, being bullied, and non-positive experiences with a weapon ³. Additionally, children who have a military parent are far more susceptible to suicidal ideation than their civilian peers ⁴. Factors that increase the risk of suicide for military children include ⁵:

- 1 Exposure to trauma from a military parent's combat experience
- 2 Availability and general acceptance of guns in the home
- 3 Frequent moves
- 4 Cultural resistance to mental health treatment
- 5 Parental absence due to military commitments
- 6 Multiple school changes

When watching the military spouse who is left behind to hold down the home front frazzled by expounded day-to-day responsibilities, military children may find it challenging to talk about their feelings and problems with their parent. That same military spouse may not make the time or feel as if they have the energy to give their military child what they need at the end of the day due to holding down a household normally managed by two. This situation may cause the spouse to miss cues that would normally lead to getting their child mental health support ⁶.

While countless individuals, including children and adolescents, feel they can manage life stress on their own, unresolved, or mounting issues can quickly creep up, and before they know it, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness may develop. These are symptoms of depression that can lead to suicidal thoughts and most often require professional clinical intervention. When you add in the current long-term high military operations tempo, the additional pressure military children face is undeniable ⁷.

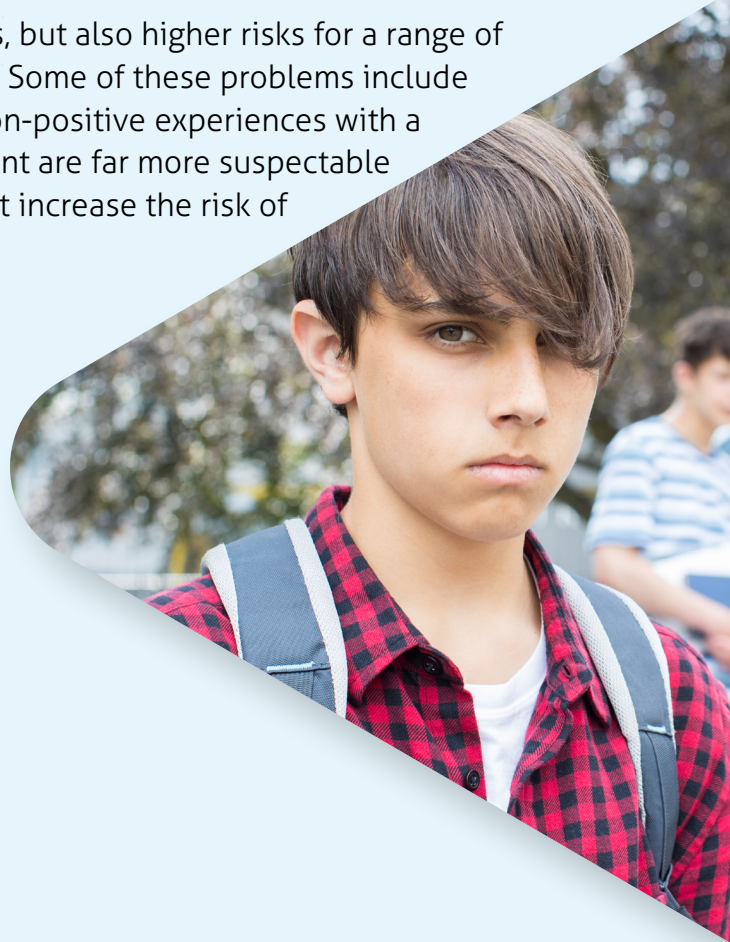
³ Jackson & North-Hager, 2015

⁴ Clements-Nolle et al, 2022; Jackson, 2013; Rabb, 2022; Zarembo, 2015

⁵ Cunitz, K., et al., 2019; Rabb, 2022

⁶ Rabb, 2022

⁷ Cunitz et al., 2019; Rabb, 2022



Magellan Federal Solution

Stamping Out the Mental Health Stigma

What if the answer lies in the way we communicate with our military children from day one? What would statistics suggest if instead of teaching our military kids to be indestructible, we instead encouraged conversations about mental health?

Magellan Federal believes that having proactive conversations with military youth can help decrease the long held mental health stigma in the military community. These conversations should emanate positivity for being tough, but also include tools to help them share what they are thinking and feeling in a safe space⁸. Our military children need to realize that even the toughest children feel overwhelmed sometimes, and that there is always someone close by who can help pick them back up again. It's important to let them know that being strong means sometimes raising your hand and asking for help. It's OK to lean on someone to help take a little pressure off. Military teams are trained to recognize when a team member needs help, and when to step up and assist. They leave no man or women behind. This same type of thinking needs to be taught when it comes to giving military children the environment they need to grow into healthy successful adults.

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⁸ Tien, 2021



Prevention Techniques and Best Practices

How can parents, educators, and medical professionals help stamp out the stigma of mental health and cultivate a resilient military child? Here are agreed upon solutions from our team of military family life counselors.

Practice a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is the belief that one’s talents can be developed through hard work, good strategies, and input from others ⁹. Using a growth mindset when interacting with your child can help them gain these skills for themselves to fall back on in times of adversity. Parents, caregivers, and educators can practice a growth mindset by:

- 1 Identifying the process, behavior, or strategy that was ineffective.
- 2 Praising them on the process, skill, strategy, or effort used to enable their success.
- 3 Providing information on how to avoid the mistake in the future.
- 4 Offering suggestions or an alternative on how to improve ¹⁰.
- 5 Sharing emotions, being vulnerable, and showing affection. Be intentional while helping build a solid foundation for social and emotional development ¹¹.
- 6 Being present and giving your undivided attention. Ask the child questions when you are not distracted and can truly listen. Take time out of your busy life to connect with each child individually, even 10 minutes a week is a great goal!

Fixed Mindset	Vs	Growth Mindset
	CHALLENGES	
Avoids challenges	OBSTACLES	Embraces opportunities
Quits easily	EFFORTS	Overcomes setbacks
Believes efforts are worthless	CRITICISM	Masters the task
Ignores criticism	SUCCESS OF OTHERS	Learns from criticism
Feels threatened		Feels inspired

Source: U.S Army, 2022

⁹ U.S. Army, 2022.
¹⁰ U.S. Army, 2022
¹¹ Mincemoyer, 2017

Practice a Growth Mindset (con't)

- 7 Scheduling time with them.** This signals to the child that they are important as everything else Mom and Dad must do each day. It helps them understand that they are valuable and validates the importance of their feelings. Use the one-on-one time to connect, share, and build a deeper relationship. A few connecting ideas include playing board games, crafting, reading a book, or taking a walk together.
- 8 Turning on your listening ears.** Use both verbal and non-verbal cues to demonstrate that what they share and feel is important. We've found that in working with military children, just offering a platform to share and be heard is a force multiplier. Ensuring that military children feel safe to communicate feelings and receive unconditional love and acceptance is key, as well as reminding them that everyone has room for growth.

Parenting with a growth mindset right from birth will increase military child resilience, which in turn could decrease suicide ideation in our military children.



Parenting with a growth mindset right from birth will increase military child resilience

Be on the Lookout for Warning Signs

Identifying the warning signs of depression and suicidal tendencies in children and youth, and taking proactive steps to get help, can go a long way in preventing military youth suicide.

Warning signs of suicide in military children



Resources for Help

Whether you are experiencing increased stress or trying to help someone who is emotionally distraught, the best way to prevent issues from becoming unmanageable is to recognize the signs early and ask for support. In addition to being mindful of having and advocating for a growth mindset when working with military children, anyone in contact with military children should be taking advantage of the appropriate resources, such as:



[Military OneSource Military Parent Resource Center](#)

[Elizabeth Dole Foundations' Hidden Helpers](#)

[Military and Family Life Counseling \(MFLC\) program](#)

MFLC BENEFITS

For military parents that worry about mental health stigma, the MFLC program can provide a free and confidential avenue for the military child and their parents. Working with an MFLC can help a child secure lifelong tool that increase confidence in handling what the military family lifestyle throws at them. Military Family Life Counselors can be found in schools, child development centers, military sponsored camps, walking around base, and even embedded at the service members unit. All MFLCs are master level, licensed clinical counselors who are equipped to provide guidance and connect customers to supportive resources.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense fully backs the MFLC program, and over the years has seen its popularity grow, possibly in part due to the confidentiality it offers services members and their families, as well as the trust that is developed between the MFLC and the service members and families it supports.

To read more about the MFLC program, access the [MFLC program brochure](#). You may also call Military OneSource to get connected at 1-800-342-9647.

Conclusion

Stress associated with military life is substantial. Intense training, frequent family relocations, deployments, and reintegration, may trigger thoughts of being overwhelmed. Consequential problems such as family conflicts, financial difficulties, parenting challenges, and lack of opportunities to develop social relationships may result in coping challenges, and in some cases, depression, and suicidal thoughts. There is no doubt that the military child is resilient, but there are many ways you can do your part to ensure military children continue to thrive.

Where there are many resources available to help, Magellan Federal believes more needs to be achieved in terms of education on mental health care acceptance. In addition to making our own pledge as a Hidden Helper, we want to embolden mental health providers to see resiliency from an untraditional lens and help increase education of military culture to combat the military mental health stigma. It is also imperative that those who encounter military children daily (parents, teachers, healthcare workers, community role models) are educated on the barriers to mental health that come hand in hand with military cultural beliefs, as well as parenting and educating with a growth mindset .

If you are a military-connected caregiver, start taking time now to view your military child as prominent members of the military family system whose feelings and thoughts count too. Create a supportive environment for them to share their feelings and take time to listen to how they are feeling. The mental health of our military children must be a priority today and every day. That is the only way we will begin to eradicate suicide in military families, especially the unnecessary deaths of America's treasured military children.



About the Author



Stacy Kay Paskvan (LMFT, LCMHC-S) is a Regional Director on Magellan Federal's Military Family Life Counseling program team, currently supervising the Northeast U.S. and OCONUS sites. She received her undergraduate degree in psychology from California State University, San Bernardino in 1997; a master's degree in counseling with an emphasis in marriage and family from Webster University in 2005; and a master's degree in management and leadership from Capella University in 2014. She has been independently licensed since 2007 spanning the states of Texas, South Carolina, and North Carolina. She is passionate about military families, being both a retired US Air Force Veteran and a military spouse and has focused much of her career on understanding the ins-and-outs of the military family. She has witnessed the struggles of many military members who have denied themselves the help they needed due to their drive to "get the job done" and appreciates the opportunity to be part of Magellan Federal's Military Family Life Counseling program

that is positively impacting the mental health of military members and their families. When not working, she spends her time shuttling her 10-year-old twins, George and Zuzu, around town, enjoying her cats and dog, and feeding the crows and squirrels that like to play in the pine trees outside her office window. She loves to travel and hopes to someday get to Kathmandu, Nepal to get a glimpse of Mt. Everest up close, as well as the Galapagos Islands.

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