

A photograph of a man in a military uniform holding a baby. The man is looking down at the baby with a gentle expression. The baby is wearing a red and blue hat. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

How to Help Military & Veteran Families

FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

For the estimated 30 million service members, veterans, and their immediate family members,¹ life can be filled with challenges and opportunities most civilians may not experience. In addition, some of these military-affiliated families have the added responsibility of caring for adults or children with special needs. You may be able to help one of these families in your own community.

“Special needs” is a universal term used to refer to many different conditions and diagnoses. The designation can range from mild learning disorders to severe impairments illnesses, or an array of disabilities. This includes not just young children, but spouses and adult children with special health care needs as well as any other adult dependent family member.² Meeting the Department of Defense (DoD) criteria for family members with special needs can be helpful during the assignment coordination process. This designation is necessary for locating specific services and support while meeting the needs of both the individual with special needs and the family.

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Did you know?

- » With a population of 1.5 million active duty service members, there are an estimated 540,000 active duty sponsors caring for a family member with special medical or educational needs. Most of those family members are children.³
- » Families with special needs often endure additional stressors including concern for the current and future welfare of their family member, financial burdens for the family, and fear of career detriment and impact at the workplace.
- » The increased need for coordination of dependent care and medical/educational services can often result in feelings of isolation and negative reactions from society.⁴
- » For military families, the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) is a mandatory program that supports military families with special medical and educational needs. The program has three components: 1) identification and enrollment of a family member with special medical or educational needs; 2) assignment coordination to determine the availability of services at the projected duty station; and 3) family support to help families identify and access programs and services.
- » The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures services to children with disabilities, and governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services. Children attending a DoD school are provided a free public education in compliance with IDEA as implemented by DoD Instruction 1342.12, "Provision of Early Intervention and Special Education Services to Eligible DoD Dependents." more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities.⁵
- » Early intervention is a system of coordinated services promoting a child's age-appropriate growth and development, while supporting families during the critical early years. These services are required by law throughout all 50 states, the U.S. territories and all locations with a DoD school.⁶ The DoD's early intervention program is called Educational and Developmental Intervention Services (EDIS). The DoD Education Directory provides lists of schools and EDIS programs located near military installations.
- » Service members and their families have access to Military OneSource (MOS) and Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC) programs, which offer free non-medical counseling to service members and their families. Non-medical counseling addresses life skills, the military lifestyle, loss and grief to help prevent the development of psychological health conditions that may detract from military and family readiness.⁷

Practical Applications

- *Offer respite.* The caregivers of children or adults with special needs often face serious stress as a result of balancing the needs of their loved one, along with the challenges of being a part of a military or veteran family. Offering breaks, through respite care, allows these families to care for their own needs as well as those of their children and spouses. Offering caretakers the ability to leave the house, go to an appointment, or just rest while knowing that their family member is well cared for, is priceless.
- *Recommend TRICARE.* Some families may qualify for TRICARE's Extended Care Health Option (ECHO). ECHO provides financial assistance to beneficiaries with special needs for an integrated set of services and supplies. Beneficiaries diagnosed with moderate or severe mental retardation, a serious physical disability, or an extraordinary physical or psychological condition may qualify for ECHO. Additional eligibility requirements can be found at <http://www.tricare.mil/Plans/SpecialPrograms/ECHO.aspx>.
- *Help with errands.* Families with special needs spend a lot of extra time and attention on their loved one with disabilities. Appointments for therapies, specialists, doctors and use of medical equipment, drain time from already-busy schedules. Even at home, some children and adults with special needs require more one-on-one attention. You can help by offering to transport a sibling to school or sporting activities, mow their lawn, make a quick run to the store, or pick up a pizza.
- *Listen.* Offering help doesn't always mean doing something for someone. Often what a caregiver needs most is someone to talk with, to maintain contact with their friends, family and community. That can be hard, however, when taking care of an adult or child throughout the day. Something as simple as chatting over a cup of coffee can ease the burden of daily worries.



Additional Resources

When equipped with the right tools, individuals like you in communities across the country can help ease the burdens of military and veteran families with special needs. Professionals in health care, education, family services, sports and recreation, and faith-based facilities who work with military and veteran families can greatly reduce the distress that they experience. You can help foster individual and family resilience. Thankfully, there are a number of resources available to help.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *Administration on Community Living*, www.acl.gov
- » *Center for Parent Information and Resources: Resources Especially for Military Families*, www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/military
- » *Department of Defense: Office of Special Needs, Educational Directory for Children with Special Needs*, apps.militaryonesource.mil/MOS/f?p=EFMP_DIRECTORY:HOME:0
- » *Department of Defense: Parent Toolkit for with Children with Disabilities*, www.disability.gov/resource/special-needs-parent-toolkit-for-military-families
- » *Family Voices, the National Center for Family/Professional Partnerships*, www.familyvoices.org/admin/miscdocs/files/F2FBrochure_10-14-2010.pdf
- » *Military OneSource Exceptional Family Member Program/Special Needs*, www.militaryonesource.mil/efmp
- » *National Military Family Association EFMP + Special Needs*, www.militaryfamily.org/info-resources/efmp-special-needs.html
- » *Operation Autism: A Resource Guide for Military Families*, www.operationautismonline.org
- » *TRICARE Resources for Families with Special Needs*, www.tricare.mil/CoveredServices/SpecialNeeds/SNResources.aspx
- » *Veterans Affairs National Resource Directory*, www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/nrd



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About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

Developed by THE MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH INSTITUTE at Purdue University
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