Operation Military Kids

Showing military kids they're not alone

“The biggest thing is that military kids feel that they're alone, and I think that the youth program, particularly with Operation Military Kids, helps open up that door and bridge that gap.”

-Rebecca Boehlke, military mom

Situation

Kids with parents in the military don't always get the support they need – from schools, teachers, neighbors and others – because people may not know their neighbor, friend or student has a parent or other relative in the military. As a result, many military kids feel isolated and often suffer academic, social and emotional problems.

For example, Randy Tunstall of Appleton doesn't talk to friends and teachers about the fact that his dad is in the military because, invariably, the conversation turns political. "It turns into a George Bush thing," says the 15-year-old. "I choose not to talk about it."

Response

A UW-Extension program, Operation Military Kids or OMK, helps lift the shroud of silence for kids like Randy. A $100,000 federal grant funds a range of activities. Now in its fourth year, the statewide project is managed by UW-Extension 4-H staff and is open to anyone with a family member in the military.

The program focuses on families of "Weekend Warriors," the reserve and National Guard troops, who are serving in unprecedented numbers in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Outcomes

Ongoing outcomes of Operation Military Kids include:
- "Day camps" during National Guard family events that offer patriotic, fun activities for children 5 to 11 while their parents attend sessions on creating a supportive home environment, planning troop send-offs and crisis management. These events also offer laptop computers and digital cameras, allowing kids to send e-mail messages and photo scrapbooks to moms and dads serving overseas.
- A curriculum for teachers, counselors, 4-H educators and others, focusing on topics such as military culture, the deployment cycle, fostering resilience in kids, and the influence of the media, to help people understand the unique issues facing military youth.

- "Speak Out for Military Kids," a leadership program for older youth that focuses on building skills in public speaking, research and organization. This program allows kids to share their experiences and ideas, and raises awareness of the many sacrifices military families make.

- Three- and four-day summer camps at Camp Upham Woods near Wisconsin Dells designed especially for children with relatives serving in the military.

- "Hero packs," backpacks filled with blankets, pillowcases, quilts, letters of support and other donated goodies, given to kids at military events such as deployments.

- A wide-ranging network of partnerships with UW-Extension and 4-H, including the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Wisconsin National Guard, the American Legion, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, UW-Platteville, UW-Parkside, Fort McCoy, the 115th Fighter Wing, the Army Reserve Child, Youth and School Services, and the Navy League.

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