

John: Welcome. This is a special podcast from the American Counseling Association. I am John Duggan. ACA realizes our communities' today face unique challenges; challenges unknown to past generations. Kids for example, in school face aggression and pressures to succeed. At home relationships break apart and there may be violence in neighborhoods and local communities. And media, media sometimes can bring global unrest into our homes and right into the lives of our children.

The American Counseling Association also recognizes that good things happen in families, and our homes, our schools and our communities. We know that focusing on strengths, resiliency and good healthy relationships, makes a difference in the lives of our youth. And that's why we have prepared a special series of podcasts for volunteers and staff who work directly with youth in community centers. We are here to provide some support and information that can help you do your jobs and volunteer and make a difference in the lives of our kids.

Helping kids coming from families that are in the military can be a challenging task for volunteers and staff working at community centers. Joining me today is Odis McKinzie LPC. Odis is a doctoral student at Virginia Tech University and is studying counselor education.

What is it like working with kids that come from a military family? Is it the same as working with kids who come from families with civilian jobs?

Odis: A little bit different than civilian kids because of the military culture, there's always moving, constantly moving around, situations are constantly fluid, parents deployed, sometimes there's one parent deployed, sometimes there both parents are active duty in military deployed. Sometimes you have reserve and National Guard components who are called upon at a moment's notice to deploy without any type of idea of when they are going to be returning.

So the hyper vigilance piece goes up for warriors but it also goes up for our family members because the question is will mom and dad or both make it back alive? Make it back safely, make it back fully physically functioning without any types of injuries or whatever have you. Whatever the case may be, military service members returning from deployment particularly if there is active engagement in theatre, are going to have some changes to their personalities based on the effects of war.

John: When we were talking before today's program, I really got this sense of how diverse it is, that it is that you have some kids coming from civilian background and then the wants and the needs for those kids coming from a military family are quite different. What's an important thing for volunteers and staff to keep in mind when they are trying to engage kids that are coming from a military family?

Odis: If kids are not involved in on-post or on-installation programs, after-school programs, whatever have you, and parents engage them in community resources, the kids, some of them who might be shy or not quite comfortable in a community resource because the kids don't really know them or are familiar with military culture. They will feel a little bit uncomfortable. So they are more likely to isolate, kind of stay to themselves and so forth so an awareness of that, if they see a kid kind of to themselves,

you know the head down, kind of low affect, just reaching out to them, “Hey how you doing? You know my name is so and so, tell me a little bit about, you know what’s going on with you and what things I can do to help you engage in the activities we have here.”

John: So it sounds like it’s really important to reach out to these kids coming from a military family to kind of normalize the experience and include them to bring them in.

Odis: Absolutely, absolutely and because it’s an exchange, the civilian population is learning about military culture and vice versa. I think kids from a military culture have no choice but to engage civilian culture, because they have to walk in both worlds. So it’s the civilian population that doesn’t have to necessarily engage the military culture because we are not part and parcel of it unless they are directly around military installation.

John: Well let’s say there’s somebody is listening and they’re a staff person or a volunteer in a youth center in the community, and it’s not located near a military facility, and there’s really no deep understanding of the military culture of what these kids could be going through. What would be your suggestions? What are some resources that staff and volunteers could use to better understand the needs of these children and youth?

Odis: I think certainly if they don’t have family members who are active duty or retired military or folks who served in the uniform that they can get material from or get information from. That they seek out their local community resources such as Veterans of Foreign War or VFW, any type of military organization, Red Cross, you know, any type of veterans associations, Veterans Administration. Just tap into the local resources in the military community. One source or another resource that civilians can tap into that can provide information on military culture. Very important.

John: What can be some specific issues that staff and volunteers may see when children and adolescents from a military family come to a youth program?

Odis: Oh, well for example; typically with deployed situations if there is marital or relational, relationship types of issues going on in the family, pre-deployment they probably get worse over the course of the deployment and particularly post-deployment. So we really need to be very careful about being aware, acting out types of behaviors, depression, low mood in affect and ask questions of these youngsters. “Hey how you are doing today? You alright? You seem to be kind of in your own space. Is there anything I can help you with or whatever?”

And just take friendly voice, that friendly reach out to let them know, ‘hey, somebody cares’, can do wonders in terms of just creating that space particularly with kids who are not as social. So the kids that are social will typically find and engage other kids in their age group or in their peer group, and they will go off and do what they need to do. But it’s the ones that are typically isolated, may not be as social that we need to really kind of engage and pull in.

John: And how about some examples on how you engage this kids?

Odis: For example, if you're in a local community resource such as a community center whatever have you, you know engaging them in a game of pool, or a board game or card game, art and crafts, creative types of things, music, and different type of things. We want to find out what their areas of interest are and then be able to tap into that and build that trust from the ground up. And once we build that trust from the ground up, once we make that connect with them, they begin to open up.

They have a good sense of who's kind of with them, and who isn't even when there's a naivety and a certain level of vulnerability. There is also a certain level of intuition and insight that these youngsters have, and what we need to do is kind of, be aware of and we know they'll attach to us and likewise. I think if we are open to the exchange, there are a lot of benefits that that exchange brings about, particularly for our youngsters. So we don't need to run away from but we need to run to those types of situations, Move out of our adult comfort zones and reach out to these youngsters, and give them what sometimes they are not getting in their own home environments.

A lot of these kids are not getting love and nurturing, and the support because their parents are busy, so they seek it elsewhere. What we want to do is certainly keep them away from negative activities like gangs and the social media and the internet, and different things of that nature which draw them away from positive social engagement. So there are a number of things that we can do, we just need to be a little more sensitive, a little more aware, a little more watchful of youngsters.

John: You've described some very unique experiences these kids can bring to a community center. What would you say that these kids most need from the staff and volunteers in the community center?

Odis: Yes and the sensitivity and the safety, huge important variables for our youngsters coming into a community resource, a community program. You know where your parents are gone so there's that sense of emptiness, that sense of loneliness, that sense of uncertainty. There are a lot of variables that are very deep for these youngsters and a lot of unknowns. So they are kind of swimming outside of their comfort zone, and so how do we reach out for them. They are looking for something, they are looking for anything that they can attach to, to give them some sense of--- of comfort, some sense of--- I don't know, safety, security, whatever have you. But some sense of the familiar.

John: It sounds like these kids can be really, constantly going through change, after change after change, so many transitions. What is the most important thing a volunteer could offer these kids?

Odis: Continuity is huge between family and certainly our community resources and to kind of be a stop gap measure but again that resource, that's kind of a filler. You know, "hey I am here for you. I know that your mom and dad are gone, so let's look at some of the most constructive and positive things that we can do to help you navigate, and negotiate this deployment so that you come out stronger, and a victor as opposed to feeling that you are being victimized based on your parents deployment."

John: Let's change gear just for a little bit. Sometimes when there is distress in the life of a child or adolescent or in the family system, they'll start communicating this to adults by acting out, by having some behaviors that become problematic in the group setting. What might these kids do when they are acting out and how can staff and volunteers best support them when this happens?

Odis: Well that's a great question, I think that certainly the awareness piece, but then sometimes those kids that are acting out, all they need is a big hug, because they are not feeling safe, they are not feeling secure, they are feeling vulnerable so they don't know how to deal with their-- quantify, qualify their emotions with respect to their family member beings deployed, and there's a sense of the unknown. Will they make it back you know, how long will they be gone, when will I hear from them.

So we want to encourage those type of things. We make sure, do you have a picture of your mom and dad in the house, or do you have some type of --- not instruments, but you know tangible items that connect you to your family member that's deployed that you can just reach out to, touch, grab and give you a sense of connection. You know, how often do you talk to your folks that are deployed? I'm really proud of you, you know we want to encourage them. I'm really proud of how well you are doing adapting to your parents, you know, they are serving our country, they are doing a great thing for our country.

And I'm proud of you, even though you are not wearing the uniform, indirectly you are. So I want to encourage you in your support of your parents. Tell me in what ways I can help you to better adjust to their time away they are deployed. What can I do to help you? And just kind of open ended questions to help the youngster have a sense that somebody is there for them and their resource. I can reach out to if I need to.

John: I know we touched on this topic at the top of the podcast but is there any additional training that a volunteer or staff person can get to really better understand issues of military culture and how it impacts this kids?

Odis: It's so important because youngsters, you know, in the community resource. Everything that they know is about folks that have some sense of familiarity because most of the programs are on installation, and so of course you are on an installation, everybody knows military culture, when you move into a civilian environment, most folks don't have any awareness of that. Particularly if you are in a school, external to the post or the installation, so yeah, it's almost a foreign world.

But life at the military installation is its own bubble, if you will. So that awareness, that sense of asking questions, that sense of making yourself aware, particularly if you're seeing a lot of, an influx of kids coming from the military installation into community resources. Have somebody come in, do a presentation to help staff members become more aware of how to engage the population.

John: Ok. So what about some tips or some information that could help staff and volunteers work with a child when there has been a critical incident, when a family member has been injured or hurt or even has died while in service. How do we deal with these situations?

Odis: There are a number of different resources that community programs can reach out to military resources. One obviously, military family life consultants are certainly another resource that can be accessed, where you have counselors who are consultants or counselors on post, but also live in the community to then be able to say, "Hey could you do a presentation on how best to engage this population, how best to reach out to this population."

If there's an active event where there's a parent or family member who might be wounded or hurt whether they're in their deployment, whether it be a war time scenario, or just doing their military duty, then obviously you want to be able to access Red Cross resources, make connections with the parents, with the family to help the youngster feel more so in control of the situation. To have some sense that things are going to be okay.

John: When these kids face critical incident or a major crisis like this what types of questions might they be asking of the staff and volunteers?

Odis: "Where's the information at? How is my relative? How's my parent doing in this situation? I don't know and I'm worried." Just being that support, that loving nurturing support that youngsters need in those times of particularly, this is a very vulnerable time.

John: Ultimately it seems like they're going to need a greater sense of reassurance and routine and stability. This lifestyle sounds pretty complicated and hard on the kids. What else do staff and volunteers need to be aware of?

Odis: Well, certainly having an awareness that military life involves moving from installation to installation a lot of changes with schools, multiple schools sometimes. Very, very tough for our kids because you create friends, you have friends and then you've got to leave. This is very, very difficult that the whole sense of attachment, that sense of comfort, that sense of being understood, that sense of having friends that they love and enjoy being around.

It's difficult when they have to separate. If we see those types of situations we see some sense of isolation some sense or stress that the child might be carrying on them, we want to reach out to them, "Hey how're you doing? I may not have as much familiarity about military lifestyle and military culture. Can you tell me what you're going through? What's on your mind? I'd like to know and I'd like to be able to help. I'm here as a resource. I'm here to hear you. Pardon my lack of information about military cultures but help me learn." The youngster will embrace that and they will feel that sense of connection and that you actually care. They will actually reach out and they'll actually tell you what's going on in their life.

John: Again it's important to ask the kids to teach us about their experiences, their wants, their needs, and the things that are important to them right?

Odis: And that's part of that exchange. So we're not going in as the "be all, know it all" because the fact is I think when we are able to say, "Look, I don't have any experience with military culture. Can you help me? Can you teach me? Talk to me about what you deal with every day. What's on your heart? What's on your mind? What are the stressors that you experience day in and day out with respect to dealing with military culture?"

What do you feel and sense when you know your parents are getting ready to deploy? How are you engaging your family once that member's deployed and you got to help mom out or help dad out around the house, help with the siblings. How do you take a minute to step away from all of the responsibilities that you have to come to a community resource and be able to just kind of relax and be you?

John: So creating a space where kids can just be kids, sounds like it's pretty essential.

Odis: Yes. And the community resources can be a great access point for our kids. Seeing them and just enabling them, "Hey, we got you. What do you like to do? We've got arts and craft over here, we've got games, we've got pool, we've got basketball, we got a gym here, we've got a lot of different things that we can offer you here to help engage you in activities that help you enjoy your childhood. We understand better from your telling us what you engage in day in and day out in your family life. Based on that understanding we can create activities to just help you enjoy and be a child." That goes a long way to helping a kid feel, somebody gets me.

John: You've given some good examples of activities that may be going on in the youth program. What about those kids that don't fit the particular expectation that boys will do this activity and girls will do that activity. How can staff and volunteers be attentive to the unique nature of each child or adolescent and really provide activities that will support the kid rather than what we think a boy or a girl should be doing?

Odis: I'm reminded of a recent story I heard where they were getting rid of the pink section for girls in stores, and the blue section for boys in stores, and that dolls and other different types of toys that had a gender kind of a focus are now kind of the purple if you will, where boys and girls can play with them because they just enjoy the toy. I would say that certainly for the activities some boys are not athletic. They don't have an interest in athletics. They might have an interest in art, they might have an interest in creativity of some sort, or for example, engineering activities or creating things, building things.

We want to tap into their areas of interest and maximize as opposed to putting folks in boxes. We need to really be careful about and sensitive about perceived boxes that people have just based on gender or whatever the case may be. Bias is an issue that is a human dynamic. What we need to do is to be more open to allowing people to be

themselves, to be the individual that they are and help nurture that as opposed to try to fit it into a preconceived, prescribed type of box that doesn't do anybody any good particularly youngsters.

John: Staff and volunteers can do a tremendous service to help kids particularly those coming from military families by getting beyond labels, getting beyond our expectations of what a boy or girl with this kid or that kid should or would or could do, and really valuing the individual.

Odis: Human exchange. When we break it down and separate out all of the adjectives and the different perceptions of human beings. It really gets down to the individual, and just getting to know them for who they are. I think if we allow that to come into the space, to come into the resource, there's a great gain, there's a great connection. Hence learning from both sides of the coin is a quite a wonderful experience. At the end of the day the youngster whose parents or family members are deployed feel some sense of connectedness to someone who could be a surrogate if you will whatever that surrogate role might be, while that youngster's folks are deployed.

John: For the kids who may have a parent or both parents that are deployed it sounds like staff and volunteers at a community center play a very important role in their life.

Odis: Yeah. There's no better feeling in my mind than being that bridge for a youngster. Connecting them and giving them a safe place and space to be able to engage and to grow while their parent or family member is deployed. I think that's the most important aspect of us as volunteers. And this is a way to give back. These folks put their lives on the line for our freedom. It's good to be able to look for opportunities to be able to give back and what better way than their kids? In my mind there is no better way than to be able to contribute where you're at.

John: Odis I can tell that you're deeply passionate about your work as a counselor, and the support that you provide to military service members, their families, and these kids and youth. Any last thoughts for our listeners before we go?

Odis: Just to say thank you for being open to the youngsters. Seek out the opportunities, do your research on military communities, particularly if your community resource is in and around a military installation. That way you're already kind of prepped if you have an influx of military youngsters who are coming into your community resources. You're ready to go, you're able to kind of see and be aware of what to look for in military kids.

Typically an application process of becoming involved in the community resource that's already identified in that material. If you happen to know that somebody make sure where, "Hey we've got a youngster from military communities parents are deployed. Just keep eyes out for him and engage once they he or she walks in the door." Just having that proactive preparation is always a wonderful thing.

John: Odis, thank you very much for your time. That's Mr. Odis McKinzie LPC. Professional counselor and doctoral student at Virginia Tech. That's all the time we have for today thanks so much for listening. If you have any questions or concerns, comments please email them to podcast@counseling.org. I'm your host John Duggan for the American Counseling Association saying thanks so much for listening. This program is copyright 2015 by the American Counseling Association. All rights reserved.