



Supporting Service Children

At present Ministry of Defence (MOD) services in Moray consist of RAF Lossiemouth, 39 Engineer Regiment at Kinloss Barracks, Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve based in Elgin and 2622 RAF Reservists. However, the configuration of MOD services across Moray has altered significantly over the past two years particularly with the closure of RAF Kinloss and the arrival of Kinloss Barracks. This, in turn, has led to new service communities being formed, the arrival and departure of families and redundancies. Inevitably, service children can be affected by these family changes and, therefore, as an authority we need to be evidencing that we are meeting all our children's needs, including our service children.

For many service personnel relocation is a part of life. Likewise, there is a long standing tradition that service personnel will also be accompanied by spouses and children during these moves. This, in turn, results in a high level of mobility for service children. For example, a report by Ofsted (2011) noted that some service children might have experienced up to fourteen moves by the time they reach secondary school. Furthermore, empirical evidence states that mobility can have an impact on service children's emotional wellbeing and academic progression (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2006). It has been claimed that for some service children, "the only consistency that they experience in their lives is, in fact, inconsistency" (O'Neill, 2012). Therefore, we, as educational practitioners, need to be aware of potential risk factors in a child's life as a direct consequence of mobility. For example, Ender (2000) stated that some children may find it more challenging to develop new and secure attachments and friendships. Additionally, children could experience educational issues due to gaps in education or through over-learning parts of the curriculum. To help reduce the potential risks caused by mobility, schools need to be considering how service children can be supported in their transitions when they are arriving and moving on from a school.

As well as the risk factors associated with mobility, O'Neill (2011) also claimed that service children, whose parents are deployed, can often experience high levels of anxiety and stress as a result of prolonged periods of separation from a serving parent or due to a heightened concern about the risk of injury or bereavement of a parent. Factors such as media coverage and peer influences have also been evidenced as contributing to this stress and anxiety (O'Neill, 2012). Furthermore, child development research informs us that if a child feels emotionally insecure then this can also have a negative impact on his or her academic progression. With this in mind, educational practitioners need to feel confident in supporting their service children on a daily basis.

Although some children may cope well with the challenges they face, other children may need additional support. Furthermore, schools need to know what to do to support their service children if, unfortunately, a child does experience a significant loss or change.

As educational practitioners we know that a child needs to feel safe, secure and nurtured in order to fully achieve his or her learning potential. Despite potential risk factors, some service children will thrive and flourish with little additional support. However, one would still argue that it is important for schools to be aware of the factors which could influence the daily educational experience of a service child. By being mindful of this information, it is paramount that schools implement proactive strategies and approaches to help reduce any potential risk factors and promote wellbeing and resilience in all our service children.

Proactive strategies and approaches for schools

- Know your service families.
- Build relationships with families, for example, through school newsletters or coffee mornings
- Support children whose parents/carers are deployed by helping the children send their parents cards and letters.
- Classes could have discussions about where parents/carers are deployed. This could be linked to learning about new places/countries/current affairs.
- 'Check in' with children to try and ascertain how they are feeling, especially if you know that parents/carers are away on deployment.
- Be aware of changes in behaviour (e.g. a child becoming more withdrawn or perhaps having recurrent difficulties in the playground).
- Policy and procedures should be in place to help support transitions when children are moving in and moving on (e.g. transition passport, enhanced transitions).
- Be aware of authority critical incident procedures and loss and change support networks/resources available in the local area.
- Be aware of the impact that media coverage can have on a child or young person.
- Make links with service communities – find out what they are doing and how your school can add to the support systems already in place.