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Operation Purple® Camps: Relevant Now and Then

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“To be in a military family feels like – the wave is coming closer, like the fire is growing bigger, like the wind is blowing faster, and like the earth is changing like never before.” – Military teen

Introduction

As wartime fallout continued the years after 9/11, enduring much longer than first anticipated, military mothers and fathers began to notice that their children were not only isolating themselves, but reacting in ways that were unpredictable and concerning. The media coverage, alongside uncertainty of family life and family separations, combined in a swirl of disturbing realities. Family members swiftly shared their concerns with the National Military Family Association, a respected advocacy non-profit located in the Washington, D.C. metro area.

The National Military Family Association celebrates forty-five years of being in the forefront of advocacy for military families. Since 1969, the Association has responded to identified needs of military families to seek change. Committed to strengthening and protecting the families of the men and women currently serving, retired, wounded, or fallen, this organization has grown from a small group of women gathered around a kitchen table concerned that widowed friends became destitute after the deaths of their retired servicemembers. Years ago, the retiree’s military

pension benefits ceased upon his death. First called the National Military Wives Association, these women believed that they had an obligation to speak up not only for these widows but also for the other existing quality of life issues impacting military spouses and children at that time. They learned how to lobby Capitol Hill to influence votes in Congress. And they did it well – despite being volunteers and with minimal financial resources, usually only their own personal funds. The Association's first success at lobbying resulted in the Survivor Benefit Plan – an elective annuity for eligible surviving beneficiaries after monthly financial contributions from retirees based on selected level of coverage - commonplace and accepted in today's military family world. This same Association has challenged the status quo ever since – providing needed scholarships to aid military spouses in their education and personal empowerment, engaging lawmakers to pass legislation that benefits caregivers of wounded and their families, creating a mobile initiative platform to push necessary information to those who need it at the tip of their fingertips (like their smartphones), and leading efforts to celebrate the service of spouses and children. Made possible through the generosity of funders, Operation Purple® grew out of the Association's commitment to celebrate the service of military children.

Description

Operation Purple® Camps are a logo-brand and specialized camp program well-known in the world of military children support. The name “Operation Purple” was selected by the National Military Family Association to represent both a military-related movement and an initiative available to all uniformed services, including National Guard and Reserves. “Purple” has long been part of military culture vernacular as reference for policies and programs that benefit the entire armed forces. Since the first programs were launched in 2004, almost 51,000 military children have benefited from an Operation Purple experience. As a military child and subsequent family support program, this summer camp program continues to be relevant after 10 years.

Operation Purple is a unique summer camp program for military children experiencing the deployment of a parent or guardian. The Association established this program in 2004 in response to a plea from military parents to “help me help my child.” Summer camps have long had the reputation of being an ideal place, away from technology and daily home schedules, for children to connect, meet new friends, learn about nature, and just have fun. Our summer camp program embraces the mission of “empowering military children and their families to develop and maintain healthy connected relationships, in spite of the current military

environment, through a variety of means, including the healing and holistic aspect of the natural world.” Through collaboration with residential camps across the country, as well as donations and Association funds, in 2014, almost 1,200 military children will receive a free week of summer camp. The number of children is only limited by the amount of donor funding. In 2010, almost 10,000 kids were sent to camp. The decrease in number of camper spaces resulted from the decrease in available donor funding since 2011. The Association, however, made a commitment to self-fund a significant portion of the cost because its Board of Governors recognized the ongoing unmet need for military children. Troop drawdown, defense budgets under fire, family programs at risk – the Association did not want to abandon military children at this time. Our current funding model includes shared funding from our generous partner camps. The Operation Purple program relies on each location to bring its unique camp culture to the table while integrating a curriculum that is centered on four themes: communication, stewardship, military experience, and outdoor environmental education.

From the earliest days of Operation Purple, the Association has subjected applicant summer camps to extensive third party review to ensure that selected camp partners are committed and motivated to best serve military children. Committees composed of Association volunteers,

(including board members and military parents, often educators themselves) blind rate and score applications using a matrix of desired attributes. Anecdotal evidence and empirical research have demonstrated that military children experiences stresses unfamiliar to their civilian peers, and as a result may be more likely to show symptoms of anxiety or depression.¹ Selected camp partners integrate the Operation Purple Camp Curriculum, developed by child mental health and education experts, including representation from the former Headlands Institute, now NatureBridge Golden Gate, University of Colorado, Department of Defense and military spouse educators, into their existing camp programs.

Camp Curriculum

This curriculum is designed to address the evidence-based findings of military children’s increased stress from having a parent away from home in a wartime climate, as well as the sense of isolation secondary to actual or perceived lack of support from community peer and/or adult networks. Annually reviewed and revised, the curriculum has been time-tested for specificity and relevance.

The curriculum is based on a three-pronged strategy of evidence-based components of building social support networks, physical exercise and targeted learning. Using this theoretical basis, four integrated themes

emerged: 1) Communication and Trust Building – communication tools and resiliency skill building exercises with behavioral health component to increase coping ability and enhance home communication; 2) Stewardship of Self, Family and Military Community – teambuilding activities that facilitate new friendships and peer networks while learning to best care for themselves, others, and the environment; 3) Military Experience – military-related activities such as exploring military equipment, tasting meals-ready-to-eat (MREs), talking with servicemembers home from combat, along with playing games using global positioning equipment (GPS) and night-vision goggles; and, 4) Outdoor Environmental Education/Experience – exposure to local ecology, with emphasis on *Leave No Trace*, healing and calming aspects of nature, as well as individual and community service projects designed to sustain interest in being outdoors once back home and provide redirection that can mitigate own fears in uncertain world.

Evaluation

In 2011, the Association commissioned RAND Corporation to conduct a program evaluation of Operation Purple Camps. As an organization invested in policy, practice, and research, the Association believed that more than anecdotal reports of our program were needed. Due to the

spare-to-nonexistent program evaluations of the numerous military child and family support programs, we wanted to determine the impact of Operation Purple Camp. Keeping in mind that we were examining a five-day camp experience with variables such as possible inconsistent integration of curriculum among camp partners and absence of inter-rater reliability with our camp visitor reporting process, we were pleased to learn that this evaluation found parents reporting a significant increase in communication about deployment-related stress subsequent to return home from camp. Indeed, this program evaluation validated that we were trending positively with the communication activities interwoven into the camp experience. Military kids encounter special situations that can affect how they communicate. Camps teaching communication skills provide options for military children towards coping with the deployment of a parent or guardian and connecting with the caregiver at home. This self-report of communication increase is significant in that it occurs outside of a clinical encounter.²

Operation Purple Family Retreats

Operation Purple Camps and our military children have provided the foundation for our present work with the entire family through Operation Purple Family Retreats. Since 2009, these family camp experiences

address reintegration and reunion challenges of families after years of deployment. Further, a year earlier, we developed Operation Purple Healing Adventures in 2008 as a specialized adaptive model for working with families coping with lives altered forever by life-changing injury. Our collaboration with Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) and Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs) has enhanced the opportunity to embed psycho-education, resiliency skill building, and behavioral health support in an outdoor environment, capitalizing once again on the healing aspects of being in nature. A program evaluation of these programs, meeting a specialized unmet need, is currently in progress. Sara Green, a doctoral candidate in Social Work at the University of Washington and FOCUS clinician is conducting the study.

Conclusion

And then it does come back to relevance – the need remains unmet despite leaner funding pools and changing American priorities. Pleas from military families and camp partners not to abandon their children when other resources are dwindling sparked our commitment from board members and staff for us to find ways to continue our work. Camp partners proposed cost-shared funding so that greater numbers of children could be served. Local community awareness and matching funds

demonstrated an innovative approach to extending our mutual reach. The voices of the children compel us to continue to respond with programs like Operation Purple. How could anyone do less?

References

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