



READING & RESILIENCY: MAKING LITERACY A MILITARY COMMUNITY PRIORITY



2021 | WHITE PAPER



KEYSTONE PARTNER
Reader's
Digest
FOUNDATION

United Through Reading

United Through Reading keeps military families reading together, no matter the distance between them. Families stay connected through video recordings of storytime and books sent to military families to help ease the stress of separation, maintain positive emotional connections, and cultivate a love of reading and early childhood literacy. Service members can record a story for their families at more than 200 United Through Reading recording locations worldwide, as well as on their mobile devices with our free and secure reading app. Since 1989, more than 2.4 million military members and their families have benefited from the program. Learn more at unitedthroughreading.org.

United Through Reading thanks its partners for their support, including our READiness365 Keystone Sponsor, Reader's Digest Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge BAE Systems as our Military Family Support Partner, USAA as the supporter of United Through Reading's COVID-19 Response, and Dollar General Literacy Foundation as our Books for Ownership Partner.

Reader's
Digest
FOUNDATION

BAE SYSTEMS



For more than 30 years, United Through Reading has been connecting military families through the read-aloud experience. From the piers of San Diego, where our founder recorded Sailors reading stories on VHS tapes as they boarded the ship for deployment, to our mobile reading app, launched in 2019, we have focused on the benefit of reading together, no matter the distance, to keep all military families connected.

United Through Reading storytime recordings have reduced stress for military children and caregivers; helped service members feel connected to their families, even when deployed to some of the most remote locales; and made reintegration after deployments easier for families. These recordings have also helped military families develop crucial literacy skills, helping military children stay on track with regard to learning, regardless of the disruptions military life throws their way.

Today, nearly all families face challenges with their children's educational development due to the impacts of COVID-19. Military families are not spared, and their challenges come with added complications, such as moves mandated by military service or long separations due to deployments, mobilizations, and now, quarantines.

Through these challenges, the importance of literacy as a building block for educational development has become even more apparent. While we consider how our nation can work to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learning environments, the military community should make military family literacy a priority in order to strengthen these foundational skills in military children and protect their future educational development.

Resiliency through reading is attainable, accessible, and adaptable for every child in our diverse military community. It is our duty to protect the children of those who protect the nation, and through literacy, we can.

Sincerely,



Dr. Sally Ann Zoll
CEO, United Through Reading

“I hope that lots of other kids will get the same chances I have had to read with their Dads and Moms, even when they are separated because of deployments and other work.”

- MARINE CORPS CHILD



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Issue	1
Background: Educational Challenges Facing Military Children	3
COVID-19 and Military Children’s Educational Development	6
Solution: Enhancing Military Family Literacy For Resiliency And Readiness	7

Executive Summary

Since 2001, more than two million American children have had a parent deployed at least once¹, and almost half of these have experienced the deployment of one or both parents multiple times.² During deployments, these military children endure disrupted routines with potential lifelong implications. Military children are among those at the highest risk for below-average literacy rates, which can have profound effects on their academic careers and futures.³ An early focus on literacy, establishing routines, and prioritizing parent/adult read-alouds can mitigate this risk for military children, improve educational outcomes, and impart a sense of resiliency through routine, helping military children face anything from another move to a pandemic. Literacy, and fostering an early love of reading, helps protect the children of those who protect the nation.

Issue

Literacy is foundational. In fact, early childhood literacy has a direct effect on a child's academic success, including STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, which offer the greatest opportunities for the next generation of professionals and skilled workers.⁵ Military children are particularly vulnerable to underdeveloped literacy skills due to unique challenges not faced by their civilian peers, and these challenges can negatively impact long-term educational outcomes and access to opportunities later in life. Military children's already vulnerable state in literacy is heightened by the adversity presented by COVID-19 and subsequent online learning.

“The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading aloud to children.”⁴



Background: Educational Challenges Facing Military Children

The US military is an all-volunteer force — men and women who put on a uniform and swear an oath to protect and defend our nation. The service of these 1.8 million active-duty service members and 808,000 members of the National Guard and Reserve is honored time and time again by our country. The children of those who serve, however, are less celebrated, but they form an integral part of the mission to ensure national security, and they have an important, sometimes overlooked, job: being in a military family. These children number 1.5 million, with 40 percent of them being aged five or below and nearly 75 percent being below age 11.⁶ This is compared to 66 percent of US children below age 11.⁷ These years are formative for educational development, making educational support for military children of the utmost importance.

Military children face unique challenges due to a parent's service, which can negatively affect long-term educational outcomes. More than two million US children have been impacted directly by a parent's deployment.⁸ Military children move an average of every two years—that could mean six to nine moves, or Permanent Change of Station (PCS), between kindergarten and high school graduation.⁹

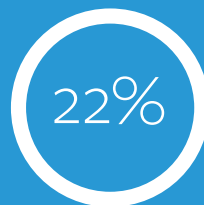
For children who need specialized education services, these disruptions can be even more impactful. In a recent survey of military families, 79 percent of those who had a child with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) said their child went without special education services for over a month after a military move.¹⁰

For all military children, each move, each new school, and each delay in educational services sets students back and presents new challenges. Public school curriculum standards and content vary from state to state; military students, teachers, and parents all rated the lack of consistency in state educational standards as a top-three concern regarding military children's academic development.¹¹ Mobile military kids often find themselves ahead or behind the curriculum, rarely right on target.

In addition to multiple moves during the formative academic years, many military children will also experience one or both parents' deployments, adding more upheaval to their lives. These deployments have various social and behavioral implications for military children, including increased stress and anxiety in 30 percent of children with a deployed parent.¹² One study of the spouses of deployed service members found increased behavioral issues for children under age four during deployment.¹³ This spills over in military children's educational development¹⁴, adding to the inherent and constant challenges they face.¹⁵



OF MILITARY FAMILIES WHO HAD A CHILD WITH AN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) SAID THEIR CHILD WENT WITHOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES FOR OVER A MONTH AFTER A MILITARY MOVE



OF MILITARY FAMILIES CHOSE TO VOLUNTARILY LIVE SEPARATELY FROM THEIR SERVICE MEMBER (“GEO-BACH”); 32% SAID THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION WAS THE REASON THEY CHOSE TO DO SO

Deployments are not the only occasion for separation among military families. There are frequent and extended absences for other, compelling reasons. Twenty-two percent of military family respondents indicated they had chosen to voluntarily live separately from their service member, as “geographic bachelors,” in the past five years; among those, 32 percent cited their children’s education was the reason they chose to do so.¹⁶ However, regarding issues of concern among military families, time away from family ranked as a top five concern for both military spouses at 45 percent and service members at 50 percent.¹⁷ In these two seemingly contrary data points, we see the struggle of military families laid bare: choosing stability and good education for their children or maintaining family cohesion—choices most civilian families won’t ever have to face.

While there continues to be a need for additional data on the experiences of military children,¹⁸ we know one thing above all else to be true: in the life of a military child, the only constant is change.



COVID-19 And Military Children's Educational Development

COVID-19 has added another challenge to the lives of students, widening the achievement gap and exacerbating challenges for military and civilian students alike. The math achievement of students, in 2020, averaged five to ten percentile points lower as compared to same-grade students the prior year.¹⁹ One study anticipates all students will lose ground — anywhere from three to 14 months, depending on the quality of and access to remote instruction. These learning losses will exacerbate existing achievement gaps by 15 to 20 percent, and an additional 2-9 percent of students — up to 1.1 million people — could drop out of high school for COVID-19-related reasons. Over a lifetime, the average student could lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in earnings because of COVID-19-related learning losses, the long-term effects of which would produce an estimated GDP loss of \$173 billion to \$271 billion per year.²⁰ However, there's no need to project its implications: fifty-seven percent of military parents report COVID-19 has already negatively impacted their children's education.²¹

COVID-19 did not create the challenges military children face, but it is one more burden they bear — we cannot allow military children to fall further behind because of its weight.

**COVID-19 RELATED
LEARNING LOSSES
WILL EXACERBATE
EXISTING
ACHIEVEMENT GAPS
15 TO 20%**

Solution: Enhancing Military Family Literacy for Resiliency and Readiness

Military service members will continue to serve, continue to deploy, and continue to relocate their families to meet the national security objectives of the US. Our 1.5 million military children will continue to face the challenges of new schools, missing parents, and disrupted routines, sometimes all at once. The global pandemic introduces new challenges, reinforcing the need to focus on foundational educational support for military children and families. With the right approach, including the United Through Reading read-aloud program, our military children and families can learn resiliency and strengthen readiness through reading.

Reading Aloud Benefits Everyone

Literacy is a foundational skill for lifelong learning and reading aloud lays the groundwork for future educational success for our military children. Reading aloud builds and strengthens the literacy skills of children by helping them correctly recognize words at a higher rather than those who read silently.²² Reading aloud encourages interactivity, leading to more frequent reading by children and future independent reading.²³ Parent-child shared reading is associated with significant gains in children's vocabulary.²⁴ In preschool children, reading aloud was associated with more brain activity, supporting comprehension.²⁵

93% OF MILITARY FAMILIES USING UNITED THROUGH READING'S PROGRAM SAID THE PROGRAM STRENGTHENED FAMILY BONDS DESPITE THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM

When parents or adult guardians of military-connected children prioritize reading aloud, they also contribute to developing positive habits in childhood that yield positive outcomes later in life, reinforcing the foundation for future academic success.²⁶ A military child's success in school is positively affected by regular family engagement in home-based literacy activities.²⁷ Additionally, the frequency of reading aloud by parents is linked to children's acquisition of skills and knowledge, supporting success in reading, writing, and other areas.²⁸ Students not reading proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school,²⁹ making these early positive interventions even more impactful for lifelong literacy.

However, the benefits are not limited to the language arts. Math competencies learned via early reading, such as counting and shape identification, may be the strongest predictor of success in math and reading later in life.³⁰ Given the growing emphasis on the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and math, strong reading skills become particularly important. Workers in STEM jobs must have advanced literacy skills to read and communicate about scientific and technical topics.³¹

Reading aloud is a key component of literacy promotion and should be emphasized when discussing support for the education of military children.

Family Focus on Reading Aloud Together

Beyond the educational benefits of consistent reading aloud together, a family focus on such reading will improve the social and emotional outcomes of military children. In addition to building brain circuits to prepare children to learn language and early literacy skills, reading aloud enhances children's social-emotional development.³²

“United Through Reading has helped me to read better. I have trouble reading because I am dyslexic. When daddy reads to me I can listen to the words and I can follow along by looking at the pictures and words in the book.”

- NAVY CHILD

Evidence about United Through Reading's reading aloud program connecting military families through video-recorded read-alouds bears this out. Ninety-three percent of military families using United Through Reading's program said the program strengthened family bonds despite the distance between them.

One of the most important factors affecting literacy is a daily reading habit.³³ Patterns and routine reduce stress by making situations seem more manageable and controllable.³⁴ Three of four military families using United Through Reading's program established and maintained reading routines, helping to create predictable patterns in their children's lives.³⁵ These routines also relieve at-home caregivers and help combat parental disengagement during deployments, making homecomings smoother.³⁶ Ninety percent of military families using United Through Reading reported an increase in their child's love of reading since receiving and watching the program's video-recordings, making these habits more likely to endure.³⁷

Reading Aloud Together as a Military Community Priority

Strong military community support for the foundational importance of literacy not only improves the lives of military families but it can also improve retention, morale, and overall mission readiness. All service branches acknowledge that family-related quality-of-life issues can impact retention,³⁸ a crucial aspect of the military's success. Family difficulties can interfere with readiness, because the service member's focus on and readiness for the mission becomes clouded by family problems.³⁹ Making sure military children's education is supported through strong literacy skills is another tool to help maintain high levels of family quality of life.

“My Dad has been deployed a lot. He’s been away for about half of my life. But I don’t feel like he’s been gone that much. I think a reason I feel like he is part of my everyday is because I still get to read with him whenever I want to. I miss my Dad, but reading really helps me stay connected to him.”

- MARINE CORPS CHILD

Reading aloud together positively impacts military family readiness. From United Through Reading families surveyed in 2020, 100 percent said the read-aloud program improved family morale during separation, 100 percent of military members reported that it improved personal morale during separation, and 98 percent deemed the program a critical family readiness and resiliency tool.⁴⁰

Knowing the benefits of reading aloud together and literacy for both social and academic well-being, especially in our military children, the military community should do all it can to support military family literacy, fostering a love of reading early in life, creating long-term positive outcomes, and building resiliency in the face of any situation, from PCS moves to pandemics.

90% OF MILITARY FAMILIES USING UNITED THROUGH READING REPORTED AN INCREASE IN THEIR CHILD'S LOVE OF READING SINCE RECEIVING AND WATCHING THE PROGRAM'S VIDEO-RECORDINGS



Conclusion

Military children will always face unique challenges. Whether they are arriving at another new school to be “the new kid” again or living through six to twelve months of upheaval while a parent is deployed,⁴¹ the life of a military child is anything but consistent. It is our duty to mitigate the effects of these challenges where and when we can. United Through Reading offers stability and continuity for children and caregivers during disrupted moments in their lives, providing a reliable connection to their deployed service member while fostering the fundamental building block of children’s education — literacy. Resiliency through reading is attainable, accessible, and adaptable for every child in our diverse military community. It is our duty to protect the children of those who protect the nation and through literacy, we can.



References

- 1 Clever, M., and D. R. Segal. "The Demographics of Military Children and Families." *The Future of Children* 23, no. 2 (2013): 13–39. Accessed March 11, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23595618>
- 2 Murphey, D. A., K. E. Darling-Churchill, and A. J. Chrisler. "The Well-Being of Young Children in Military Families: A Review and Recommendations for Further Study." *Child Trends*, January 2011: 6. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Child_Trends-2011_o8_12_FR_ChildMilitaryFams.pdf
- 3 Richardson, A., A. Chandra, L. T. Martin, Claude Messan Setodji, Bryan W. Hallmark, Nancy F. Campbell, Stacy Hawkins, and Patrick Grady, *Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*. RAND Corporation, 2011. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1095.html>
- 4 Anderson, R. C., Hiebert, E. H., Scott, J. A., and Wilkinson, I. A. G., *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. U. S. Department of Education, Center for the Study of Reading (1985), p. 23.
- 5 Business Roundtable, *Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It*. December 2016. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://s3.amazonaws.com/brt.org/BRT_Why_Reading_Matters_12192016.pdf
- 6 Department of Defense, "2019 Demographics Profile of the Military Community." Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2019-demographics-report.pdf>
- 7 Kids Count Data Center, "Child population by age group in the United States, 2010-2019." The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/101-child-population-by-age-group>
- 8 Chandra, A., et al. "Children on the Homefront: the experience of children from military families." *Pediatrics*, vol. 2012, no. 125, 2010, pp. 16-25. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/125/1/16>
- 9 Dickler, J. "Military families face financial hurdles." *CNN Money*, March 27, 2012. Accessed March 11, 2021. <http://money.cnn.com/2012/03/27/pf/military-families/>
- 10 Partners in PROMISE, 2021 Military Special Education Survey. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://thepromiseact.org/2021-survey/>
- 11 Military Child Education Coalition, *Military Kids Now 2020 Survey*. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://www.militarychild.org/upload/files/MCEC_2020EdSurvey_digital.pdf
- 12 Collins, Elizabeth M., "Experts Explain Mental State of Military Children." *Soldiers Magazine*. May 6, 2015. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://www.army.mil/article/147786/experts_explain_mental_state_of_military_children
- 13 Barker, L. H., and K. D. Berry, "Developmental issues impacting military families with young children during single and multiple deployments." *Military Medicine*, 174(10), 1033–1040. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7205/milmed-d-04-1108>
- 14 Collins, E. M., "Experts Explain Mental State of Military Children." *Soldiers Magazine*. May 6, 2015. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://www.army.mil/article/147786/experts_explain_mental_state_of_military_children
- 15 Richardson, A., A. Chandra, L. T. Martin, Claude Messan Setodji, Bryan W. Hallmark, Nancy F. Campbell, Stacy Hawkins, and Patrick Grady, *Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*. RAND Corporation, 2011. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1095.html>
- 16 Blue Star Families. *Military Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report, 2019*. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf>
- 17 Blue Star Families. *Military Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report, 2019*. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BSF-2019-Survey-Comprehensive-Report-Digital-rev200305.pdf>
- 18 Chandra, A., and A. S. London, (2013). "Unlocking insights about military children and families." *The Future of Children*, 23(2), 187–198. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2013.0010>
- 19 Kuhfeld, M., J. Soland, B. Tarasawa, A. Johnson, E. Ruzek, and K. Lewis. "How is Covid-19 Affecting Student Learning? Initial Findings from Fall 2020." *Brookings Institute*, 2020. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/>

- 20 Dorn, E., B. Hancock, J. Sarakatsannis, and E. Viruleg, “COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime.” McKinsey; 2020. Accessed March 11, 2021.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>
- 21 Blue Star Families. COVID-19 Impacts Snapshot. January 2021. Accessed March 11, 2021.
<https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-MFLS-COVID-19-Impacts-Snapshot-Infographic.pdf>
- 22 Pritchard, V. E., M. Heron-Delaney, S. A. Malone, and C. M. MacLeod. “The Production Effect Improves Memory in 7- to 10-Year-Old Children.” *Child Development*, May 2019. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13247>
- 23 7th Annual Kids and Family Reading Report, Scholastic. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.scholastic.com/readingreport/>
- 24 Zevenbergen, A. A., S. Worth, D. Dretto and K. Travers. “Parents’ experiences in a home-based dialogic reading programme.” *Early Child Development and Care*, 188:6, 862-874, Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1241775>
- 25 Hutton, J. S., T. Horowitz-Kraus, A. L. Mendelsohn, T. DeWitt, S. K. Holland, and the C-MIND Authorship Consortium. “Home Reading Environment and Brain Activation in Preschool Children Listening to Stories.” *Pediatrics*, August 2015, peds.2015-0359; Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-0359>
- 26 Business Roundtable, *Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It*. December 2016. Accessed March 11, 2021.
https://s3.amazonaws.com/brt.org/BRT_Why_Reading_Matters_12192016.pdf
- 27 Murphey, D. A., K. E. Darling-Churchill, A. J. Chrisler. “The Well-Being of Young Children in Military Families: A Review and Recommendations for Further Study.” *Child Trends*, January 2011: 6. Accessed March 11, 2021.
https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Child_Trends-2011_08_12_FR_ChildMilitaryFams.pdf
- 28 Breiner H., M. Ford, and V.L. Gadsden. *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2016. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27997088/>
- 29 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. January 2012. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/>
- 30 Harris, B. and D. Peterson. *Developing Math Skills in Early Childhood*. Mathematica Policy Research, 2019. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/developing-math-skills-in-early-childhood>
- 31 Business Roundtable, *Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It*. December 2016. Accessed March 11, 2021.
https://s3.amazonaws.com/brt.org/BRT_Why_Reading_Matters_12192016.pdf
- 32 American Academy of Pediatrics. “Literacy Promotion: An Essential Component of Primary Care Pediatric Practice.” *Pediatrics*, August 2014, 134 (2) 404-409. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2014-1384>
- 33 Cullinan, B. *Helping Your Child Learn to Read*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. (1996)
- 34 Piedmont Healthcare. *Why Routines are Good for Your Health*. Accessed March 11, 2021.
<https://www.piedmont.org/living-better/why-routines-are-good-for-your-health>
- 35 Hawvermale, E. M. *Read to Me: The Impacts of Participation in United Through Reading (UTR) on Military Members, Children, and Spouses*, thesis, May 2020. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library. Accessed March 11, 2021.
<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703307/>
- 36 Richardson, A., A. Chandra, L. T. Martin, C. Messan Setodji, B. W. Hallmark, N. F. Campbell, S. Hawkins, and P. Grady, *Effects of Soldiers’ Deployment on Children’s Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*. RAND Corporation, 2011. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1095.html>

- 37 Hawvermale, E. M. Read to Me: The Impacts of Participation in United Through Reading (UTR) on Military Members, Children, and Spouses, thesis, May 2020. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703307/>
- 38 Military Personnel Management: How Are the Military Services Adapting to Recruit, Retain, and Manage High Quality Talent to Meet the Needs of a Modern Military? Hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, 116th Congress. (May 16, 2019).
- 39 Keller K.M., K.C. Hall, M. Matthews, L.A. Payne, L. Saum-Manning, D. Yeung, D. Schulker, S. Zavislan, and N. Lim. Addressing Barriers to Female Officer Retention in the Air Force. RAND Corporation; 2018. Accessed March 11, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2073.html
- 40 Hawvermale, E. M. Read to Me: The Impacts of Participation in United Through Reading (UTR) on Military Members, Children, and Spouses, thesis, May 2020. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703307/>
- 41 Military One Source, "Deployment Basics by Service Branch." 2020. Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/military-life-cycle/friends-extended-family/deployment-basics-by-service-branch/>



T 858.481.7323

UnitedThroughReading.org

f [unitedthroughreading](#)

t [utrmilitary](#)

@ [utrmilitary](#)

▶ **SEARCH:** United Through Reading