

Informing educators about your service will let them look out for trouble signs in your children

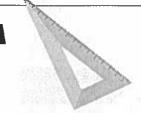


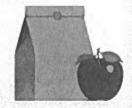
s your kids head back to school, guidance counselors and other school staff members want you to tell them you're a Guard Soldier and inform them of your missions and training schedule. That's because your service could have ripple effects on your child in the classroom, says Dr. Mark Pisano, a psychologist for Fort Bragg Schools in North Carolina and coordinator of the National Association of School Psychologists' Military Families Interest Group.

School counselors, teachers, and even PTAs or PTOs can provide immeasurable support. Here's how each can help you and your child:

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR/ SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

They may be the most critical support source for your child—even more so than teachers. That's because teachers have to balance the needs of about 30 children. Guidance counselors and school psychologists are trained in trauma and grief. Even if they aren't familiar with the military way of life, they still know how to identify trouble signs in children and can become a valuable bridge between you and your child's teacher. Not all children struggle with a parent's deployment, but for those who do, the counselor or school psychologist can be crucial in





helping the child find ways to cope in a healthy manner.

The knowledge that your child is a "Guard kid" opens the door for individual deployment support sessions from the counselor or school psychologist; otherwise, the child remains invisible. Schools with more than one military child may also offer small group counseling. Fort Bragg Schools, for example, have "Club USA," which provides a lunchtime forum for about eight kids in which they discuss how they're managing deployments.

TEACHERS

Guard parents face a challenge unique among military families because they can be called upon for emergency missions in their state and can be unexpectedly absent. This, Pisano says, can wreak havoc on a kid's classroom behavior and academic performance: "It's much more traumatic emotionally because the child has no time to prepare."

By informing teachers that your child comes from a Guard family, you avoid four pitfalls:

- 1 // Teachers may incorrectly assume your child's inattentiveness is due to a condition like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. "It's easy for them to accidentally jump to that conclusion, when in reality, your child is suffering through trauma and grief of a deployment or your absence," Pisano says.
- 2 // Teachers may attribute falling grades to a lagging work ethic.
- 3 // Teachers may label a child as a "discipline problem" if he or she becomes irritable, withdrawn or, if they start to experiment with drugs or alcohol. In actuality, Pisano says, "The child is simply trying to manage the stressors and grief they're feeling."
- 4 // Teachers may also assume a withdrawn child is anti-social, but if they know a parent has left for Guard duty, they can support the child during "social" times like lunch or sports practices.

PTA/PTO

The role of the PTA or PTO is to help connect you with other parents in the Guard or military. But because members are not trained professionals in child psychology or education, use these organizations for your support—not your child's.

"The PTA [is] helpful in publicizing support groups for nondeployed spouses, in particular if they have a newsletter," Pisano says. "Ask the school counselor or school psychologist to do an article on deployment support groups for nondeployed spouses. I've done this quite a bit; we have lunch and hammer out the issues, and I've had five or six parents every week."