



A Guide on Substance Use, Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Resources to Assist a Military Child

Introduction

As a parent or caregiver in a military family, you do the hardest and most important job in the world - raising happy and healthy children – while also dealing with the challenges of military service. Children in military families often experience family separations for trainings and deployments, frequent moves, and may experience a service member’s injury, disability, or death^{1,2}. These experiences can put your military child at increased risk for substance use³. Preventing substance use in your child is important to supporting their health and protecting them from harm. This guide was created to help you understand substance use risks to military children, and shares tips, tools, and resources to help you protect and support your child.

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Military families are as unique and diverse as civilian families. But military families face common challenges and hardships that bond them together as a community.



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What Parents/Caregivers Need to Know

Substance Use and Military Children

Adolescence is a time of risk for military youth to begin using substances just as it is for their civilian peers. The good news is that according to a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) report on military youth, most military youth are not using substances. But any use can be harmful to your child's health and risk for developing a substance use disorder. [Alcohol](#), [marijuana](#), [prescription drugs](#), and [vaping](#) products are the substances youth are most likely to try. Military youth, like their civilian peers, are most likely to use what they have access to either at home, through peers, or in the community. Finding ways to secure substances and to dispose of unused prescriptions in order to limit improper access are important tools in prevention.

Is My Military Child at Risk for Substance Use?

Research shows that compared to their civilian peers, military-connected youth are about 50% more likely to report using alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and other drugs³. While being from a military family alone does not increase your child's risk for substance use, certain experiences common to military life (i.e. multiple deployments, frequent moves, physical injuries and/or mental health difficulties of a parent or caregiver) can create stress for your child^{4,5}. Most military families and youth respond to these stressors with resilience and strength³. However, some military youth may need extra support. To learn about risk factors common to all youth, visit Partnership to End Addiction's resource on [risk and protective factors](#) and visit SAFE Project's [Lessons Learned](#) resources which specifically address how to talk to your child whether they are young or young adults, as well as what to do if you suspect there is a problem.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) data for military youth ages 12 to 17 shows some of the following statistics:

9.3%
reported using alcohol

5%
reported binge drinking in the past 30 days

3.2%
reported smoking

10.7%
reported using marijuana in the past year
cigarettes in the past 30 days



Risk Factors Unique to Military Youth

Deployment

Research shows that deployment of a military family member significantly increases a child's risk of substance use as compared to civilian and non-deployed military peers². If you have been through a deployment, you know what an extremely challenging time it can be for the family. Your child's risk of substance use also increases with longer deployments and the more deployments they experience⁶. At particular risk are military youth whose living arrangements are disrupted⁷. This is especially true, when a military child cannot stay with a parent or relative during a deployment⁷.

During deployments, ramp up monitoring and communication with your military child. Encourage an open dialogue with your military youth and check-in with them about how they are coping. Pay close attention to how your child is coping during a deployment and don't forget to take care of yourself. Military children cope better with deployment when their caregiver is also taking care of their mental health. Take advantage of [family support services](#) available to you through the military or your community. Military families that reach out or feel supported by those around them experience less deployment stress⁶.

For a military child, a deployment cycle can be one of the most stressful events they will experience.



Older Military Sibling

Military youth with a sibling on active duty are at an increased risk of substance use compared to their civilian peers as well as compared to youth with only a parent in the military. In fact, youth with military-connected siblings report the highest rates of lifetime use of alcohol and marijuana⁸. Older siblings may be a source of exposure to substances for their younger siblings so monitoring and open communication in the family are key.

Risk Factors Unique to Military Youth

Frequent Moves

According to the National Military Family Association, military families move 2.4 times as often as civilian families and can transition between schools as much as nine times in their K-12 school years. When your military child is facing a move, it can help to ramp up monitoring and communication. Try to get to know who your child is spending time with in any new location. Help them cope with the stress and sadness of leaving a familiar place behind and keep an open dialogue about how they are doing. For more resources and support visit: [Military OneSource: Moving & Housing](#).

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According to the National Military Family Association

Family Service Member's Physical and Psychological Injuries or Death

Service members may return to their families and children with physical injuries, trauma, and mental health symptoms. The extra stress placed on the family can lead to an increased risk of substance use for your military youth⁶. If there are new prescribed medications in the household as a result of physical or psychological injuries, make sure to keep them secured and out of the hands of your child. Visit Partnership to End Addiction to learn more about [securing and disposing medications](#).

Youth who have lost a family member are also at an increased risk for substance use⁹. It is important to get care and support when needed to cope with family injuries, disabilities, or deaths. How well a child will cope can depend on how their family responds. For more information on support and resources, visit:

[Cohen Veterans Network](#)

Military OneSource: [Caregivers](#) and [Survivor & Casualty Assistance](#)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Helping Military Families with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Parents](#)



Tips and Tools for Families

As a military parent or caregiver, you are the biggest influence in your child's life. Building and maintaining a strong bond with your child, especially as they move from childhood into adulthood, can help reduce their chances of substance use. Partnership to End Addiction has free information and resources that can help you [prevent substance use and take early action](#). The following resources and tools offer research-based strategies for your military family:

- For help on how to start the conversation and what to say to prevent substance use in your military child, download Partnership to End Addiction's [Parent Talk Kit](#) and visit [Preventing Drug Use: Connecting and Talking with Your Teen](#).
- Setting rules and limits may be even more important during times of uncertainty like deployments and moves. Here are ways to set limits and monitor your military child's behavior: [Setting Limits & Monitoring Behavior to Prevent Substance Use](#).
- To assist you in an individual conversation on how to talk to your child about substance use, visit Military OneSource's [Talking to your Teens about Substance Abuse](#).
- For ways family, friends, or other caring adults can support a military child, visit Military OneSource's [4 Ways You Can Support the Children You Love During Their Parent's Deployment](#).

Importance of Treating Other Mental Health Symptoms

Along with substance use, military children are at risk for other behavioral health problems and mental health symptoms including anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and thoughts of suicide during deployment cycles^{12,13}. To learn more about what to do if your child is struggling with mental health issues at the same time as substance use, download Partnership to End Addiction's free guide: [Substance Use + Mental Health: Your Guide to Addressing Co-occurring Disorders](#).



Tips for Talking:

- **Keep lines of communication open** and come from a place of love and compassion
- Balance any consequences with **positive encouragement**
- **Look for teachable moments** as natural opportunities to discuss substance use
- **Draw on your military family values** as a way to frame the conversation and set your expectations for behavior

Addressing Substance Use in Military Children

Addressing substance use when it happens and as early as possible can help protect your child from further harm. Should your military child need treatment, there are resources to guide you through the treatment process and the transition into recovery. To learn more, visit the below resources from Partnership to End Addiction and SAFE Project.

Military child might be using substances

[How Worried Should I Be About My Child's Drug Use?](#)

[If You Discover Your Child is Using Drugs: Start Talking](#)

[At the First Signs of Substance Use](#)

Military child might have a problem

[How to Identify Substance Use Disorder](#)

[Get Support Now](#)

[Help & Hope by Text](#)

[When Things Get Rough](#)

[TRICARE](#)

[SAFE Treatment Locator](#)

Navigating your military child's treatment and transition to recovery

[Treatment and Recovery](#)

[Medication Assisted Treatment \(MAT\) Explained](#)

[When Your Loved One is in Treatment](#)

[How to Support Your Child's Transition Out of Treatment](#)

[Early Recovery: What to Do When You Transition Out of Treatment](#)

[How to Thrive in Recovery](#)

Resource Legend:



Military-specific Resources for Families

General Assistance Resources

[Military OneSource](#)

Resources and support for the military community. Call 1-800-342-9647.

[Military Crisis Line](#)

This website offers a crisis hotline via phone, internet chat, or text to all service members. Call 1-800-273-8255 or text 838255.

[Military Kids Connect \(MKC\)](#)

Online community and resources for military children.

[Military Child Education Coalition](#)

Delivers programs and services, to meet the needs of military-connected students.

[Sesame Street for Military Families](#)

This site provides a wide range of resources for military kids.

Military Substance Use and Mental Health Care Resources

[TRICARE Mental Health Care](#)

Covers both inpatient and outpatient mental health and substance use disorder care.

[Elizabeth Dole Foundation - Hidden Heroes](#)

Support and resources for military caregivers.

[The Cohen Veterans Network](#)

A national network of mental health clinics serving military families.



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