

Chapter 10

The School Counselor's Role in Supporting Military-Connected Youth

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ABSTRACT

Throughout their K-12 educational experiences, military-connected youth often face a high degree of uncertainty and mobility due to their parent's service. These transitions often create stressors that impact the academic and social-emotional development of children and adolescents from military families. Because of their position and training, school counselors play an important role in addressing the educational needs of military-connected youth. Within this chapter, the author discusses military culture, describes the transitional challenges in which military-connected youth experience and highlights ways in which school counselors can utilize interventions to support this unique population. Recommendations and suggestions for future research are also explored.

INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 1.65 million **military-connected youth** across the globe, one million of which are school-aged youth enrolled in grades K-12 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). In contrast to their **civilian** peers, **military-connected youth** experience distinct transitions including **deployments, relocation**, and reintegration into **civilian** life (Cole, 2016). With these consistent changes, **military-connected youth** are often faced with academic, social, and emotional challenges that impact their educational achievement (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Additionally, 80% of school-aged **military-connected youth** attend **civilian** schools (Cole, 2016). **Civilian** school educators, including school counselors, are often unfamiliar with addressing the unique concerns of **military-connected youth** (Chandra et al., 2010). Because school counselors are trained to address the academic, social/emotional, and career development needs of all students, it is imperative that they are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the needs of military-connected students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2015).

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By the end of this chapter, readers will:

- Enhance their knowledge of military culture and transitions.
- Understand the educational challenges faced by **military-connected youth**.
- Identify interventions to support **military-connected youth** in schools.

BACKGROUND

Military Culture

In order to better understand the challenges faced by **military-connected youth**, it is important to first explore the cultural aspects of the military. The literature discusses the military as a “unique environment that causes military personnel and families to have experiences that differ from civilians” (Redmon et al., 2015, p. 9). Military life is rooted in discipline and sacrifice and is governed by specific characteristics including history, mission, core values, structure, hierarchy, language, and occupation (Cole, 2014; Redmon, et al. 2015). Although service members have a shared culture, their individual experiences are often shaped by the military and personal cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, age, religious/spiritual affiliation, gender, and sexual orientation (Kelty et al., 2010). This combination of military and personal culture also impacts the lives of military families, especially youth, in how they understand the world around them (Cole, 2016).

For school counselors, cultural competence is critical when supporting **military-connected youth** (Cole, 2014). Understanding the experiences of children and adolescents from military families allows school counselors to recognize how culture impacts education and identify specific ways to support this unique population in schools (Cole, 2016). Although ASCA (2016) called for school counselors to support the academic, social/emotional, and career development needs of youth, **civilian** educators are often unfamiliar with military culture and life, leaving them unequipped to support **military-connected youth** (Chandra et al., 2010).

Learning about military culture can be similar to learning about a new place, with language as a critical element to learning (National Military Family Association, 2014). Language is an integral part of culture, especially within the military. Understanding military language helps one to understand how service members and their families organize their world (Cole, 2014). Within military culture, language varies among branches, with acronyms and terms connected to specific occupations, services, and resources for both service members and their dependents (Cole, 2014). School counselors must exhibit cultural competence and sensitivity regarding language, as some terms can be viewed as marginalizing. For example, the term “Army Brat” can be seen as endearing to some, but insensitive and offensive to others. When school counselors understand language and its impact on military culture, they aid in removing barriers to communication and are better equipped to effectively address unique academic and social/emotional challenges in **military-connected youth** (ASCA, 2015).

In addressing the needs of culturally diverse populations, it is imperative that school counselors consistently engage in a process of self-examination (ASCA, 2016). In order to embrace diversity and improve cultural responsiveness, school counselors must explore their own belief systems and how it drives their work in the school environment (ASCA, 2015). Through an ongoing process of self-examination, school counselors can become better equipped in understanding the ways in which culture connects to behaviors

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