



# Military Child Buddy Program: Start one in your school

## Background

As a mother of three children I have been volunteering in schools or with the parent teacher association (PTA) for over 5 years. I have been through a number of moves with my spouse throughout his 20 years of Coast Guard service. I've seen first hand the hardships school transition has on military kids. I've also seen schools that got it right and had successful buddy programs in place. These buddy programs can change the whole outlook of a new student before they even step foot in the classroom by establishing a welcoming school environment. This early investment makes the whole school year go smoother.

The following Military Child Buddy Program was implemented in a public school in the D.C. area because the military kids needed more support. Military students started school with little to no information or peer contact and families that could not make the open house event or transferred mid-year missed out altogether. Our school district had a 100 million dollar deficit and overcrowding left the counselors scrambling. There was no money or time to devote to a new program. Hence the creation of the Military Child Buddy Program. A successful program that is FREE and requires ONE person to organize.

## Value

The Military Child Initiative report from John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health states, "Research has taught us that second only to family, school is the most important stabilizing force in the lives of young people... Strong scientific evidence demonstrates... Students connected to school do better." The report, which was authored by Robert Blum MD, MPH, PhD professor and chair at John Hopkins University, was funded by a grant from U.S. Department of Defense and goes on to say that school connectedness is vital to children who have one or both parents in the armed forces.

This is due to the fact that school transition often equals stress for many military kids (milkids). For students, common school transition stressors include: new friends, differ-

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ent extracurricular activities, change of school rules and potentially engaging in distinct teaching methods like the Common Core. Even for children that seem to acclimate well, starting over multiple times can be stressful. Elementary students who are just learning how to express their feelings verbally may experience even greater stresses and challenges. This does not include the additional stress of having a parent deployed.

U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) reports the majority of military students attend public school. This equates to more than 600,000 students. The average military-connected student moves six to nine times during their school years and three times more often than civilian peers as reported by DoDEA. Elementary students could attend upwards of four different schools between kindergarten to sixth grade. These numbers are the norm. A school environment where military children feel stable, welcomed and connected is vital to their success.

“Based on current research evidence, students’ school connectedness can be increased through evidence-based strategies such as... students actively participating in their own education. They need opportunities to participate in new-student orientation programs, **buddy programs** and welcome programs.” (Military Child Initiative, John Hopkins Bloomberg, Dr. Blum) School connectedness not only helps students do better academically it has also been linked to decreased risky behaviors such as bullying, fighting and vandalism.

Current research also shows great promise for programs and approaches that create positive and purposeful peer support. Along these lines are the social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. Having an effective research-proven SEL program, like Service Learning, available in schools can have a positive impact on students’ academic performance. ([www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)) Buddy programs are service learning programs that provide real-world context for communication and interaction.

### **Mission of Program:**

The mission of the buddy program is to meet military connected student transition needs by:

1. easing “new kid” stress by providing friendly peer contact before school starts
2. creating a positive environment for military families at the school, and
3. encouraging increased school connectedness and acceptance

The goal is to give the new student and family a familiar and friendly face in the crowd.

## Overview:

The buddy program matches current military students with new military students of the same gender and same grade. Current military students are asked to call the new student and talk to their buddy about important school and local information. A list of suggested conversation points like “lunch protocol” and “favorite school event” is provided to get the discussion going. A face to face meet up is planned and the parents decide on a meeting place the first day of school so the buddies can walk into school together.

New students are not the only ones that benefit. New parents often cite the program for helping them make early and lasting connections to the community. Current students acting as a buddy improve their confidence and communication skills, they get to see firsthand the effects of community service and feel the satisfaction of helping others. Additionally, children, get to make a new friend that understands what being a military child is all about. The program encourages intermingling of military branches and builds strong connections across all service members and guardsmen.

All these benefits strengthen the connection students and families have to the school.

## Details:

### Must Haves

- an updated database of current military families that includes student name and grade, a parent contact email and if the student would like to participate in the buddy program.
- a communication channel for newly registering military families to hear about the program and then be able to request a buddy for their new student.

Step 1: Approval. Get approval for the program from the school’s administration and inform the PTA president about the program specifics especially if the school has an active PTA. The more support the better. The detailed program guide gives you all the talking points needed to explain the mission, goals and benefits of the program.

Step 2: Market the program. Utilize all of your school’s existing communication channels to connect with military families. An easy way to begin marketing is to start a dedicated military family email account whose owner can easily be updated for continuity. For our school we created a military gmail account.

**Step 3: Build your database.** If your school does not already have a database of current military families with the information listed above in the “Must Haves”, then you can use the school’s communication channels (school wide emails, social media pages, PTA newsletters, flyers home, school and PTA websites, room parent or teacher emails) to initiate communication. Request that interested military families email the school’s military email account to join the military specific distribution list. In the initial communication with current families explain the buddy program and any other military focused events the school will be holding during the year such as Veteran’s Day or Month of the Military Child. Families should include their student’s name, grade, contact info and if the student would like to be a buddy. (Note: some school districts have a military identifier as part of their database. If your school has the ability to pull a report of current military connected students, your job just got a lot easier.)

**Step 4: Find New Families.** Once you have a database of current military students that are willing to be a buddy, the program is simple. Now you need to find and communicate with the new families. There are several ways to do this. You can create a flyer with the military email account info and buddy program information. Give the flyer to the school registrar to distribute to new military families. You can also attend school led summer meet ups to interact and meet new families. Word of mouth is highly effective. Ask current military families to be on the lookout for moving vans in their neighborhood and to tell new military families about the buddy program and military email account. Posting the information on the school website and PTA website is imperative. Another creative way to communicate with new military families is using neighborhood and/or local military specific Facebook pages. Again, if your school has the ability to pull a report showing newly registered military families, have this pulled at regular intervals during the summer to connect with any new families. The earlier you assign a buddy the greater the impact. Even if the students only get to meet once or just do a phone call that is better than no contact at all.

**Step 5: Assigning the Buddy.** Hopefully all the communication channels you are using will have the new families contacting the school’s military email account to request additional information. You can then let the families know more about the buddy program and ask if their student would like to participate. Once you get a “yes” you can assign the new student a buddy. Below is an example email the student designated as the buddy will send to the incoming military student.

**Step 6: Follow up is required.** Check-in with the transitioning family to ensure their buddy has been in contact. If the assignment was made early in the summer, its a good idea to contact the new family after a few weeks to make sure the face to face meet up

happened. The follow up communication also provides an opportunity to answer additional questions and to provide further assistance and support.

### Example Buddy Assignment Email:

Hello Weston and Weston’s Parents, Here is your buddy! Aidan just moved to the neighborhood and will be starting 3rd grade this year. Please give him a call and talk to him about “school name”. Below are some suggestions. Please plan at least one meet up before school starts and establish a meeting place the first week of school to walk in to class together. If you are unable to make the initial contact with Aidan this week please reply to this email and we will establish an alternative plan.

Student Name	Grade Level	Parent name	Email	Status	assigned buddy
Aidan Freeman	3rd	Julie and Tom Freeman	<a href="mailto:free@gmail.com">free@gmail.com</a>	New	Weston Page

Suggestions to talk to your buddy about:

- Tell them about your “specials” (art/music/PE)
- Tell them that lunch is assigned seating so they do not have to worry about finding a seat with someone.
- Tell them about any fun after school camp you attended or event you went to last year. (for example: fall fest, story time night, trash to treasure, running club, spring fling, or fun school assembly)
- Tell them a little about how your day went last year...for instance morning meetings...
- Ask if they are riding the bus or walking?
- Ask them their favorite food and maybe suggest a restaurant in the area that is your favorite.
- Tell them your favorite place to play outside of school (ie. favorite playground or splash park)
  - Sports league info
  - Girl or Boy scout troop info
- Ask them if they have questions?

Thank you so much for signing up to help a new military child with their school transition. You are helping build a wonderful, inviting community at “school name”. Please contact me if you have any questions.

## Program Testimonials:

The first year this program launched the school had 32 new military students beginning in September and 18 were placed with buddies. 7 of the students that were not placed were incoming Kindergartners who have a week long program during the summer to get acclimated. The other 7 were students who at that time were not interested in a buddy or were relocating locally.

- review from new fourth grader... "I liked it a lot because I had a friend before school started so I didn't have to go looking for a ton more friends. My buddy was really nice, I'm glad I got him."
- new parent review... "The benefit reached beyond just my kids. Having a friendly face to ask questions about school and the area was helpful for me. I too, had someone I knew on the first day of school at drop off and pick up...a gift in itself."
- new parent review.... "My children enjoyed the play dates we had with their buddies. I enjoyed meeting the other military moms as well. They have all been very welcoming to us. I didn't realize how much I needed their support until I got it. Thanks for making the program possible for us."
- current parent review "I thought it was a great idea and I wish it had been around when we moved here. Our buddy only pcs'd here the week before school started, so we only met with her once but we showed her around the playground and I was able to answer most of the mom's questions. My daughter would love to be a buddy again."
- current second grade student review "I liked helping a new kid that was in the military. I always feel scared the first day and I was happy I made someone feel less scared."

## Conclusion:

The Military Child Buddy Program is a turn-key solution for parents or administrators that would like to better support military children in their school. Currently there are no other free guides to starting a buddy program. Buddy programs have been proven to decrease stress in new students and create a welcoming school environment. Research shows buddy programs enhance school connectedness. Our kids deserve the opportunity to make their next transition their best yet. The Military Child Buddy Program gives them that chance to flourish in their new town.

## References:

**Blum, Robert MD, MPH, PhD, (2004)** William H. Gates Sr. Professor and Chair, Department of Population and Family Health Sciences, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. [School Connectedness: Improving students' lives](#). Document is a product of the Military Child Initiative and was developed through support provided by the Department of Defense Military Child in Transition and Deployment State Liaison Office. It draws upon the commissioned papers and concluding declaration on School Connectedness generated at an invitational conference held at the Wingspread Conference Center in June 2003 and published in the *Journal of School Health*, September 2004. That conference was sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health.

**Stukas, A. A., Clary, E.G., & Snyder, M. (1999).** [Service learning: Who benefits and why](#). *Social Policy Report, Society for Research in Child Development, XIII* (4), 1-22. An extensive review of service-learning research literature documented benefits for students, institutions, and communities. Service learning has been shown to impact students' personal development in areas such as personal efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence. In addition, service learning has been shown to improve students' moral reasoning, problem-solving, perspective-taking skills, and understanding of attitudes toward diverse groups in society. Students who engage in service learning have frequently been demonstrated to show increases in personal and social responsibility (e.g., Conrad & Hedin, 1981; 1982; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Markus et al., 1993; Sax & Astin, 1997) and altruistic motivation (Yogev & Ronen, 1982).

**Billig, S. (2002).** [Support for K-12 Service-Learning Practice: A Brief Review of Research \(PDF\)](#). *Educational Horizons* 80(4), 184-189. In this review, Billig describes the body of research supporting service-learning effects on K12 students.

**Department of Defense Education Activity (March 2015)** Report to Congress-Assistance to Local Education Agencies for Defense Dependents' Education [http://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/Final-with-Cover-March2015\\_ReportToCongress.pdf](http://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/Final-with-Cover-March2015_ReportToCongress.pdf)

**Davis, C. & Yang, A. (2005)** [Investing in Parents During the First Six Weeks of School](#) Responsive Classroom Newsletter, published by Northeast Foundation for Children.