



Military Families and Students with Learning Disabilities

This toolkit includes the following items:

- “Military Families and Students with LD — An Overview”
- “Special Education Laws and Rights for the Military Child”
- “Tips for Military Parents on Supporting Their Children in Special Education”
- Related Resources



Military Families and Students with LD — An Overview

Are you (or your spouse) a member of the U.S. military who is also raising a child with a disability? If so, rest assured you're not alone. According to Congresswoman Susan Davis (D-CA, and Chair of the Military Personnel Subcommittee), there are 100,000 military families with children or other family members who have some type of disability.

Military families — even those whose loved ones don't have special needs — face a host of challenges. Frequent relocation around the country (or around the globe) and deployment (and extended absence) of one or both parents can make life difficult for children. Sometimes a grandparent must assume the role of caregiver and education advocate when a child's parents are unavailable. If your child has a disability, the challenges become even greater. You and your family deserve extra support. The good news is that there is a wealth of support — and new legislation — to help you and your child.

One of the most difficult disabilities to identify and address is learning disability (LD), sometimes called the "invisible disability." LD is less obvious than many other disabilities, and usually isn't identified until a child enters elementary school. Nevertheless, the sooner LD is identified and addressed, the greater chance a child has of keeping up in school rather than losing ground and losing self-esteem. In this article, the first in a series of three, we'll guide you through the maze of challenges that you and your "military kid" may face.

Before we delve into the topic of special education and the military, let's step back and look at the larger landscape of military kids and education.

Education and Military Families: The Big Picture

Exactly how big is the "student body" among military families? Here are some statistics that might surprise you:

- There are approximately 1.5 million children and youth today in U.S. public schools whose parents are in the military. (Source: Military Child Initiative)
- Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) operates more than 200 public schools in 15 districts located in 13 foreign countries, seven states, Guam, and Puerto Rico. All schools within DoDEA are fully accredited by U.S. accreditation agencies. Approximately 8,785 teachers serve DoDEA's 102,600 students. (Source: Wrightslaw) However, about 80 percent of military children attend school in a civilian school district. (Source: National Military Family Association Fact Sheet, 2006)

Note: The DoDEA is essentially a subdivision of the Department of Defense (DoD). Military parents whose children have physical disabilities that require special education will probably deal with the DoD in general for the child's medical needs and with the DoDEA specifically for special education issues.



While life in the military certainly offers benefits, it often comes at a price. Military families typically face challenges in school and at home, such as:

- Frequent relocation — every 3 years, on average. This means starting over in a new community — and a new school — each time the family moves.
- Living overseas (in some cases), adjusting to a different culture and/or feeling isolated living at a remote military base.
- The stress of having one or both parents deployed far from home. Children are affected by the absence of one or both parents and have even higher levels of stress when their military parent is in a war zone shown constantly on T.V. (Source: National Military Family Assoc.) A child’s distress level is also closely tied to the number of months a parent has been deployed during the child’s lifetime. (Source: Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, April 2010.)
- A correlation between a child’s distress level and that of his or her parent(s). In one study, researchers found that about one — third of the parents left at home while their partners were deployed experienced increased anxiety and depression. Almost 40 percent of recently returned deployed parents showed elevated anxiety and depression. (Source: Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, April 2010)

A military child who has a learning disability or learning difficulty will likely face some additional challenges:

- The assessment of a child’s learning disability, his special education placement, and the development of his Individualized Education Program (IEP) may be disrupted by frequent family relocation and transfer to a new school.
- Many children find it stressful to adjust to a new school, with new routines, teachers, and classmates. Those with LD may have an especially rough transition since they often struggle with social skills as well as academic work.
- Professionals may have trouble distinguishing a true LD from learning difficulties due to stress — related symptoms that stem from having a parent deployed in a war zone, or the child trying to adjust to a new school and social life after the family lands in a new location.
- When a child changes schools frequently, it may be tricky for teachers (and parents) to monitor his academic progress. Systems for documenting his performance may vary from one school to the next, and teacher observations may not be passed along to the next school.

Clearly, many military families whose children struggle in school face significant challenges. Fortunately, there are many resources and supports available to assist you in meeting your child’s needs. These are highlighted in the second article in our series, “Special Education Laws and Rights for the Military Child.”

And, our third article in the series, “Tips for Military Parents on Supporting Their Children,” will offer some practical ways you can manage your child’s education experience.

Non-Traditional School Options

Some families choose alternative school options for their children with learning disabilities when they feel it will better meet their needs. Some examples:

- Private school
- Homeschooling
- Virtual/online education

If you are considering any of these options, be sure to consult with a DoDEA case manager, who can help you research the relevant laws in the state where you live, as well as the requirements and resources available through your public school district or the DoDEA.



Special Education Laws and Rights for the Military Child

Growing up in a military family has its advantages and adventures, but for [kids with learning disabilities \(LD\) and others who need special education services](#), the road can be rocky. Whether your child is being evaluated for special education services or is already enrolled, you'll want to understand how special education works in both civilian public schools and those governed by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), because you're likely to experience both when you're a military family.

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Differences between Civilian and DoDEA Schools

In both civilian schools and those operated by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), the processes for assessment and special education implementation are essentially the same. However, there are some important differences.

- In DoDEA schools, the term **Case Study Committee** is used to describe the team of professionals and parents who make decisions about a child's special education program. Public schools may use other terms, such as **IEP (Individualized Education Program) team** or **Committee on Special Education (CSE) team**.
- The DoDEA schools use a [standard IEP form](#). Public schools use a variety of IEP forms which may vary slightly from state to state.
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that ensures a free and appropriate education for children with certain types of disabilities and prevents discrimination against them. IDEA lists and defines disability categories, but each state, and the Department of Defense, sets their own criteria. All states differ in their specific criteria. The DoDEA schools in the United States and overseas use the same criteria, but the criteria may differ from that used in some state public schools. Heather Hebdon, founder and director of [STOMP \(Specialized Training of Military Parents\)](#) explains one reason for this is that today's DoDEA schools are still operating under IDEA 1997 (not the most current version).



Challenges for Military Children in Special Education

Military children who are enrolled in special education, or who are being assessed for learning disabilities and eligibility in special education, often face the following challenges:

- When a child with an IEP moves to a new school district, his or her IEP may not be immediately recognized and enforced in the new school. Parents must navigate a new system each time they move. Heather Hebdon explains the challenge. “I often hear about this happening when a child transfers from a non-DoDEA school to a DoDEA school. The DoDEA school may not be well-informed about special education rights, so parents need to educate the school about what resources the school is required to provide to their children. But parents are not as aware of their rights as they might be. This is gradually improving as both parents and DoDEA schools become better informed.”
- IDEA 2004 mandates that a child’s new school district must provide a [Free and Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\)](#) and “comparable services” until an evaluation is performed and a new Individualized Education Program (IEP) is created. When districts interpret this broadly, they may provide inferior services to the child and ignore the prior IEP. (This happens with both interstate and intrastate moves.)
- The assessment of a child for a disability and eligibility for special education is sometimes delayed and disrupted because the family is transferred during the process. In Hebdon’s experience, “Transfers from one state to another are the toughest. It’s true that any data collected at the former school needs to be considered by the new school district, but the criteria for a learning disability — and for special education eligibility — vary from state to state.” Deadlines for finishing the evaluation start all over again in the new locale.

Fortunately, some of these issues have been recognized and remedied through new legislation, particularly the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act.

Recent Improvements to Special Education for Military Children

The [National Defense Authorization Act](#) was signed into law by President Barack Obama on October 28, 2009. This [new legislation](#) mandates a program to support military families with special needs, establishes a Defense Department **Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs**, and requires a comprehensive policy on support to families. Some key provisions of this important act include:

- Military personnel who have family members with identified special needs will be assigned to locations where care and support for those needs are available. Assignment of those families will remain stable for a minimum of 4 years.
- Timely and accurate evaluations of family members with special needs.
- Enrollment of family members with special needs in military departments that support them.
- Staffing and funding of an adequate number of case managers through the Department of Defense to provide individualized support for those families.
- Improved development, monitoring, record keeping, reporting, and updating of an individual services plan (whether medical or educational) for each special needs family.
- More support for U.S. military families worldwide in obtaining referrals for services and help securing services.



How soon will these provisions go into effect? “These changes will roll out gradually,” Hebdon explains. “The (new) four-year assignments will happen as military personnel are reassigned at the end of their current assignments. Implementation will take time as the military must balance this with managing overall manpower and mobility issues. It may also take time to hire and train new case workers and to develop a more efficient reporting and record-keeping system. I hope they’ll be diligent in collecting data that measures how well the new systems are working,” says Hebdon.

What about Section 504 Plans?

When a child with learning difficulties doesn’t qualify for special education under IDEA, then a [Section 504 plan](#) may provide helpful services and accommodations. Section 504, a civil rights protection, is valid in the United States and its territories, but not in foreign “host countries” where military families may be stationed.

To remedy this discrepancy, in 2000 President Bill Clinton signed an executive order that requires the basic non-discrimination provisions of Section 504 be observed by DoDEA schools in host countries (except in military academies and other schools with strict national security criteria). The **DoDEA Accommodations Plan** is the equivalent of a Section 504 plan in the United States.

Response to Intervention and Military Kids

In recent years, a system of teaching and support called Response to Intervention (RTI) has gained momentum in K-12 schools. While RTI is a general education initiative, it has important implications for students with LD. Instead of relying on measures of discrepancy between a student’s potential and his academic performance, RTI is the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions. Unlike the discrepancy model (often called a “wait-to-fail” approach), RTI can help teachers recognize and address learning disabilities before they become a problem and the child experiences frustration and failure in school.

And now, Hebdon reports, “The DoDEA is looking into using RTI in the schools it governs. I think this is a great idea, because military kids tend to be over-identified as having learning disabilities simply because they are frequently transferred from state to state, where education standards and instruction vary. While those students try to adjust to a new set of rules, they appear to flounder and teachers assume they have LD. Using RTI to identify problems at a younger age and address them without special education whenever possible would help alleviate this problem.”

Parents are their Children’s Best Advocates

“Military parents are, overall, excellent and effective advocates for their kids with special needs,” Hebdon notes. “In fact, military families participate in their children’s IEP meetings at a very high rate — 92%. This is partly because the military allows parents time off (with no penalty) to attend such meetings.”

Learn some practical ways [you can help support your “military child” with special needs](#).



Tips for Military Parents on Supporting Their Children in Special Education

It's critical that you have the right professionals (e.g., educators, case workers, and others) supporting your child's needs, but remember that you are your child's best ally and advocate. Here are some tips for supporting your military child's needs if he or she has a learning disability — at home, in school, and in the community at large.

Your Child's Social and Emotional Needs

While school and learning are important, don't overlook your child's social and emotional needs. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Be mindful of how the military lifestyle may affect your child's self-esteem and emotional state — for better or worse. Encourage him to tell you how he feels and address any problems, with professional help if necessary.
- Create a sense of social continuity for your child. Luckily, technology developments in recent years have made this easier than ever. Stay in touch with family members at a distance, as well as with friends from your previous neighborhoods. Help your child connect with them through phone calls, email, video chats, social networking sites, letters, and postcards.
- Encourage your child to make new friends when you move to a new location. Support his efforts by hosting play dates, meeting other parents, and joining community groups. When you're living on base, it's easier to meet others who understand the military lifestyle. If you're not living on base, you may need to make an extra effort to help your child connect with new friends, especially if the school year is already underway.

Your Child's School Experience and Learning

You have the power to be your child's best advocate and help him succeed in school. Try these tips to help your child learn successfully at school — and in life:

- Understand your child's specific disability and how it affects him. For example, if he has a reading disability and needs audio books to help him read successfully, be sure his teachers are aware of this and make sure that those accommodations are part of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- [Partner with your child's teacher](#) by reaching out and opening the lines of communication. Share important information about your child, be open to the teacher's feedback and ideas, and try to keep the relationship positive and constructive. Given that you're likely to relocate every few years, it's especially important to establish those parent-teacher-school connections as soon as possible.
- Recognize your child's strengths and talents; help him develop them to offset his disability and also increase his self-esteem. For instance, a child who struggles with reading might be an amazing artist. Make sure he has opportunities to express himself through art at school, at home, or in another setting. A focus on strengths and talents will likely help your child to readjust more easily when he changes schools.



Make the Most of Every Move

The military lifestyle offers exciting opportunities with each new deployment, whether you relocate to a new state in the U.S. or abroad. Examples for you and your family to try:

- Before you move, you and your family can learn about your future community. Tap into military and community resources for information, and also do some research on your own. Involve your child in this process by asking what he or she is most interested in knowing about your family's new location.
- After you move, look for opportunities to learn about the history, culture, and natural environment of your new location.
- Share what you learn with family and friends across the miles. Send (or post online) postcards, photographs, video, and stories about your new locale.
- If you move to a different climate (e.g., from desert to snow country), explore new sports and activities that weren't possible where you lived before.

Stay on Top of Special Education

Understanding special education laws in general, as well as how they apply to military families and your child in particular, can be daunting. Fortunately, there are many resources to help you accomplish this:

- Stay informed about special education and how it impacts military families. [Military Homefront offers free electronic newsletters](#) devoted to issues like special needs.
- Become familiar with your special education rights and responsibilities, and learn about the [similarities and differences between regular public schools and DoDEA schools](#).
- Set up a system to keep school information, contact information, and records organized and up-to-date. This is especially important as your child moves from one school to the next, whether in your current community, another state, or at an overseas location. Two resources to try:
 - [Special Care Organizational Records](#)
 - [Military Students on the Move: A Toolkit For Military Parents \(pdf\)](#)
- If you're not already enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), consider signing up. [Learn more](#) about the special supports they make available to you.
- Request a Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) case manager to help you navigate the educational system and advocate for your child. It can be tough to do this on your own, and a "partner"/insider may prove quite helpful.
- [Locate resources](#) you can access in a way that's convenient and comfortable for you. If you have limited Internet access, request telephone numbers, printed materials, or one-on-one meetings.
- Partner with your child's teachers early on, and stay in close touch with them. Make sure teachers' input is well-documented and that this record is transferred to your child's future school(s).
- Be an active participant at your child's IEP meetings. Consider asking your DoDEA case manager to attend with you if you're concerned about an upcoming transfer to another school.



In Your Corner: Exceptional Family Member Program

[The Exceptional Family Member Program \(EFMP\)](#) exists to support military families with special needs and ensure their needs are met. **Enrollment is mandatory and required immediately upon identification of a special need.** Unfortunately, far fewer family members who are eligible are currently enrolled in this valuable program. (Source: NDAA 2010 Conference report)

Plan Ahead but Go with the Flow

Be proactive about your child's education and plan ahead, but be flexible. If there's one thing a military parent knows well, it pays to have a contingency plan!



Related Resources

Additional Resources for Military Families

- Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA)
- State-by-State Education Resource Center
- State Department of Education Locator
- Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP)
- Military Students on the Move (PDF)
- Military Child Education Coalition
- Military Homefront: Department of Defense Special Needs Parent Toolkit
- Military Homefront: Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)
- Department of Defense Domestic Dependant Elementary and Secondary Schools: Special Education Services
- Changing Schools and IEPs
- Military Community Directory Special Needs Contacts
- DoD Resource Locator

Related Content on LD.org

- Types of Records a Parent Needs to Keep
- Building a Good Relationship with Your Child's Teacher
- Military Families and Students with LD – An Overview
- Special Education Laws and Rights for the Military Child
- Tips for Military Parents on Supporting Their Children
- How IDEA Can Help You Help Your Child
- What is FAPE and What Can it Mean to my Child?
- NCLD's Resource Locator

About the Author

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LD.org — Designed with Parents in Mind

The National Center for Learning Disabilities' LD.org Web site offers busy parents a “one-stop shop” — answering questions about learning disabilities (LD) and providing free, helpful resources for the entire family as you move along the “LD journey.”

Visit these sections on LD.org to find the LD information you need.

LD Basics

“The basics” about various types of learning disabilities.

In the Home

Real-life suggestions to help parents manage the day-to-day challenges and expectations of having a child with LD.

At School

Information that teaches parents how to advocate for their child by explaining their child's rights.

College and Work

Strategies and tools for parents whose children are transitioning from high school to work or college.

On Capitol Hill

Highlights education and civil rights legislation that directly impacts students with LD and their families.

NCLD's free high-quality resources include:

- Parent & Advocacy Guides
- Exclusive NCLD policy-related publications
- Checklists and worksheets
- Online newsletters
- LD Insights Blog
- Legislative updates, and more

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