

# ***Supporting and Celebrating Children from Military Families: Practical Tips for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers***

*By Sarah Scheerger, MSW, LCSW, PPS, author of “Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends” and mom of four*

## **The Power of a Healthy Personal Narrative**

Humans create narratives to help them integrate personal experiences. These narratives<sup>1</sup> are “their story”—a description of their life experiences that helps them make sense of the world.

Caregivers and teachers can help expand the narratives for children of military parents by offering appreciation and acknowledgment of their very own contributions to their country.

In “Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends,” the community celebrates children from military families. This narrative focuses on the child’s personal contribution, legitimizing it, and solidifying its importance. In doing so, we *send a clear message to children that they matter, their experience matters, and their contribution matters.*

### **Practical Tip:**

### **Creating Our own Healthy Narrative**

- Give your child a journal
- Encourage them to write or draw about their own experiences.
- Below are some possible journal prompts, but create your own as well.
  - o My favorite ways to keep in touch with my caregiver when they are deployed are . . .
  - o My favorite memory of a time when I connected with my caregiver when they were deployed . . .
  - o My favorite ways to welcome my caregiver home after they are deployed . . .
  - o My favorite things about being from a military family are . . .
  - o The everyday heroes in my life are. . .
  - o The ways that I am an everyday hero are. . .
  - o When I’m missing a deployed caregiver, I often . . . and this helps me feel better.
  - o My story of all the places I’ve lived. . .
  - o My favorite adventures. . .
  - o Today I am feeling sad (or angry or worried) and this is why . . . and this is how I am going to help myself feel better.
- And many more! A journal is also a great place to write when feeling sad/angry/worried. Many of the above prompts are worded to foster positive/loving memories and narratives.

## The Benefits of Personal Contributions

“Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends” follows a group of diverse children as they each contribute to their families in a variety of ways. While a caregiver is away, the children are helping out at home.

Research shows that children who help with household chores starting at a young age were more successful in careers, had better relationships, and were more well-adjusted.<sup>ii</sup> Having personal responsibilities in the home creates an opportunity for them to give back to their families and see themselves as an important contributor. Having responsibilities can also reduce boredom (there are always more chores to be done!)

### Practical Tips:

### Making Chores Work for You

- When a caregiver must be away for a while, set expectations for how responsibilities might shift.
- Set your child up for success by selecting chores that are within their skill level. Build on those successes over time.
- Make a chore chart

Acknowledging appreciation for helpful acts is a way of providing verbal positive reinforcement. This can be a source of positive attention. It’s also a way to help strengthen a healthy personal narrative and positive self-talk<sup>iii</sup>.

### Practical Tips:

### Verbal Positive Reinforcement

- You’re helping the family out.
- Thank you for working so hard.
- I bet you’re proud of yourself.
- Let’s take a photo for \_\_\_\_ so we can show them what you accomplished

### Positive Self Talk Can be Modeled Too

- I’m helping my family
- I am a hard worker
- I am determined, and I can do this.
- I’m an important part of helping my family
- This is how I’m contributing.
- If I’m overwhelmed, I’ll just do one part at a time
- Mistakes are how I learn

If a particular chore is too challenging for a young child, consider pairing that child with an older sibling. This can be an opportunity for mentorship and bonding.

### **Understanding, Identifying and Normalizing Complicated Feeling States**

While the focus of “Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends” is positive and celebratory, the day-to-day realities of having a parent deployed may bring up many feelings.

Parents, caregivers, and teachers have a unique opportunity to cultivate awareness of emotional states. Feelings have multiple expressions. We often feel our emotions viscerally, in our bodies. Sadness can be a tightness in the throat, bridge of the nose, or heaviness in the chest. Anger often feels hot and energizing. Our faces and bodies reflect our emotional states. Teach your child how faces/bodies reflect feelings. When they appear to be experiencing a strong emotion, help them identify how that feels in their bodies.

#### **Practical Tips: Helping Kids Create a Feeling Vocabulary**

- How does that (situation/experience) make you feel?
- How does your body feel when you have that emotion?
- If your child doesn't know how they're feeling, you can add this: Sometimes people feel \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ when they are in a similar situation. Everyone feels differently. Do any of those feelings reflect your experience? Which feelings would you add to reflect your personal experience?
- How do you think the character is feeling in this story? How can you tell?
- How do you think your friend is feeling right now? How can you tell?

Feelings are normal and human. Even unpleasant feelings are part of being human. There is no “wrong feeling” but how you express the feeling can be healthy or unhealthy. Help your child embrace and identify their feeling states and find ways to express them in a healthy, adaptive manner.

#### **Practical Tips: Making Understanding Feelings Fun**

- Draw feelings in a Feelings Chart.
- Play Feelings Charades (pick a feeling and act out the feeling while people guess)
- Play Feelings Pictionary (pick a feeling and draw a visual representation of that feeling while others guess)

# My Feeling Chart

Draw images of each feeling.

|                  |                    |                     |                  |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| <b>Hopeful</b>   | <b>Happy</b>       | <b>Frustrated</b>   | <b>Tired</b>     |
| <b>Sad</b>       | <b>Silly</b>       | <b>Calm</b>         | <b>Hurt</b>      |
| <b>Worried</b>   | <b>Lonely</b>      | <b>Annoyed</b>      | <b>Shy</b>       |
| <b>Bored</b>     | <b>Jealous</b>     | <b>Confused</b>     | <b>Surprised</b> |
| <b>Energetic</b> | <b>Embarrassed</b> | <b>Excited</b>      | <b>Friendly</b>  |
| <b>Angry</b>     | <b>Proud</b>       | <b>Disappointed</b> | <b>Stressed</b>  |

It is quite common to feel “mixed emotions”, which is experiencing more than one emotion at a time. Sometimes these emotions can be conflicting. For example, it is possible to feel sad, angry and lonely when a parent is deployed, while simultaneously feeling proud and loving.

**Practical Tips:**

**Mixed Emotions**

- Draw a circle
- Have your child come up with all the feelings they’re experiencing in the moment.
- Have your child divide the circle up into pizza slices.
- Have your child pick a color to represent each feeling they’re having.
- Have them color in the number of pizza slices that represent how big the feeling is, thereby giving space to all their feelings. It’s okay if the feelings overlap. Feelings are not nice and neat; they are often messy and complicated (and that’s okay).
- Draw a funny mixed emotions face and come up with a new name for that feeling (example: Hangry = Hungry plus Angry)

Identifying, acknowledging, understanding, and accepting feelings is a great place to start. Teaching and modeling coping skills (for uncomfortable feelings) is an important next step. Coping skills are techniques people use to help themselves feel better. There are both healthy and unhealthy coping skills in this world. Teach your children healthy ways to cope. A few examples of healthy coping skills are talking to someone, creative outlets (art, music, writing), journaling, exercise, meditation, breathing, healthy distraction, etc.

**Practical Tips:**

**Coping Skills**

- Model healthy coping skills by using them yourself
- Talk about coping skills
- Help them identify their feeling state. Provide space for them to feel that feeling. After they’ve had a chance to express their feeling and experience it for a period of time, ask them “what can you do to help yourself feel better?” They may not be ready to use the coping skill right away.
- Make a Coping Skills Chart that they can reference when they need a reminder of what they can do to help themselves.

# MY COPING SKILLS

## How I help myself feel better

*(Circle the ones that work for you. Add your own)*

|                             |                            |   |                            |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Talk to someone you trust   | Listen to music            | Breathe deeply  | Take a walk with a grownup |
| Exercise                    | Read a book                | Write in a journal  | Draw in a journal          |
| Take some time for yourself | Find a healthy distraction | Center yourself and notice your senses.<br><small>What do you see, hear, feel, smell and taste?</small> | Practice Yoga              |
| Hug a stuffed animal        | Sing a song                | Play outside  | Blow bubbles               |
| Get fresh air               | Spend time with a pet      | Use your imagination  | Organize or Clean          |
|                             |                            |   |                            |

## The Power of Word Choice

Verbalizing the positives does not negate the challenges. When speaking with a child, consider replacing the word “but” with the word “and”. For example, “I know you’re angry right now, but I need you to be a helper.” This could be reworded to “I know you’re angry right now, *and* I need you to be a helper.” The word “but” can accidentally minimize feelings, whereas the word “and” acknowledges them. The use of the word “and” also makes space for the simultaneous experience of conflicting emotions.

### Practical Tips:

### Word Choice

- Replace “but” with “and”
- Take a moment and think about what you want to say so that you choose your words carefully

## Cultivating Compassion, Empathy, and Community

When children read “Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends” it may foster empathy, compassion and a sense of community. When reading this story with children who are not from military homes, help them think of creative ways that they can support the children of deployed parents in your community. When reading this story with children who are from military homes, help them brainstorm what creative things would feel supportive to them, and share them with friends and community.

In “Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends” the characters create a “Hero Wall.” This provides an opportunity to discuss the everyday heroes around us as well as cultivate discussion about how each child can be a hero in their community by being an “upstander” rather than a “bystander”.

Understanding emotions in ourselves help us understand them in others as well. This helps with perspective-taking. Talk about how your child might feel in a similar situation. Model this empathy to your child, to your friends and family, and in your interactions around you. You can demonstrate this when reading books or watching movies. Even if your child is misbehaving, you can still show empathy and validate their emotional state. “It looks like you’re angry. Everyone feels angry sometimes.”

A sense of community is important for us all. We crave a sense of belonging and understanding. Community can be found both among military families and within the larger community as a whole. We can help to cultivate this by celebrating days like “Purple Up Day!”

## **Staying Connected During Deployment**

Families find many creative ways to stay in touch during deployment. Some talk on the phone, via email or messaging, and through social media, Skype or Facetime. Some families share jokes. Some create special mementos or transitional objects to help them feel close to the family member who is far away. Some make voice recordings. Some send care packages to their deployed loved one. These are just some ways families stay connected. There are resources available to support children during deployment.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Linking Children to Social-Emotional Supports**

When a child or family is struggling, linkage to a support service can be invaluable. Counseling creates a non-judgmental and supportive environment in which to process thoughts, feelings and consider choices. There are multiple modalities for such support, including individual counseling, family counseling, group counseling, behavior management supports, and psychoeducation. A mental health professional can help guide you to the right support for your child. If you are unsure where to start, the school counselor on campus, or your child's pediatrician will likely have resources. There are community-based counseling clinics, supports on base or through the military<sup>v</sup>, and private practitioners in the community.

## **Creating a Celebration Day of your own**

"Purple Up Day" is just one example of a day created to celebrate and honor. There are many others. Why not create your own? When students work together to celebrate each other or someone special, this cultivates compassion and empathy.

Acts of kindness are the gifts that keep on giving, as they benefit both the receiver and the giver. Create a "school helper's day", a "parent appreciation day" (in which students honor parents), a "pay it forward day," a "random act of kindness day" ... the options are limitless.

In 2024, there are more than 1.6 military kids<sup>vi</sup> from the United States. "Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends" provides an opportunity to celebrate them, their experience and their contribution. Children from military families—thank you for your service!



### Links and Resources for Youth and Families (there are many more)

- Operation Purple Camp <https://www.militaryfamily.org/programs/operation-purple/operation-purple-camp/>
- Counseling Supports [Youth Behavioral & Family Life Counselors | Military OneSource](#)
- Purple Up USA list of organizations that support military families <https://www.purpleupusa.org/resources>
- Operation Military Kids <https://www.operationmilitarykids.org>
- Month of the Military Child Tool Kit [https://www.militarychild.org/MOMC Toolkit](https://www.militarychild.org/MOMC_Toolkit)
- Blue Star Families <https://bluestarfam.org/>
- School Liaison Program through Military One Source <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/leaders-service-providers/children-youth-and-teens/month-of-the-military-child-toolkit/>
- Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission <https://mic3.net/>
- Counseling Support <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/non-medical-counseling/military-onesource/non-medical-counseling-for-youth-teens/>
- Supporting Children and Youth During Deployment <https://planmydeployment.militaryonesource.mil/deployment/family-members/supporting-kids-during-deployment/>

### About the Author:

Sarah Scheerger, MSW, LCSW, PPS, is a mom of four as well as a mental health clinician, providing counseling within both private practice and a variety of school-based settings. She uses a strength-based approach and offers individual counseling, group counseling, and social-emotional learning classroom presentations, as well as supervises graduate students who are training to become counselors themselves.

Sarah is inspired by the strength, wisdom, and resilience of young people with whom she works. She firmly believes that all children deserve to see their experience reflected in the pages of a book. Sarah's hope with "Purple Up! We Salute Our Friends" is both for children from military families to see their experience reflected and honored in the pages of a book, as well as to help non-military kids and teachers fully "see" and appreciate and celebrate their contribution.

She has co-presented at CSLA (California School Library Association) at STA (Surrey Teacher Association) Convention, and at a Social Justice Summit through Millersville University. She has also been a guest speaker for local groups, a guest on podcasts, and has spoken on author panels. Sarah has offered virtual interactive author presentations in schools across the United States, as well as in India, Hong Kong, and Canada. She finds these visits rejuvenating and leaves with inspiration, hope, and admiration for today's youth and their potential.

## References and Links

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<sup>ii</sup> Personal Narratives <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-personal-narrative/201810/interpreting-our-reality-through-story>  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-personal-narrative/201810/interpreting-our-reality-through-story>

Info on Narrative Therapy: <https://www.verywellmind.com/narrative-therapy-4172956>;  
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/narrative-therapy>

<sup>ii</sup> Benefits of chores

[Study finds having kids do chores is a good thing - Washington Times](#)

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/12/study-finds-having-kids-do-chores-is-a-good-thing/#:~:text=Marty%20Rossmann%20of%20the%20University%20of,be%20more%20successful%20in%20their%20careers.&text=Marty%20Rossmann%20of%20the,successful%20in%20their%20careers.&text=of%20the%20University%20of,be%20more%20successful%20in>

<https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/responsibility-and-chores/part-i-benefits-of-chores/>

<sup>iiiiii</sup> Positive Self Talk <https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-to-teach-kids-to-engage-in-positive-self-talk-5205084>

<sup>iv</sup> Supporting Children During Deployment

<https://planmydeployment.militaryonesource.mil/deployment/family-members/supporting-kids-during-deployment/>

<sup>v</sup> Counseling Support <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/non-medical-counseling/military-onesource/non-medical-counseling-for-youth-teens/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/Month-of-the-Military-Child/#:~:text=1.6%20Million,Military%20Children>