Supporting Children of National Guard Families During Domestic Operations

National Guard Domestic Operations (DOMOPS) are missions conducted within the United States in support of civil authorities, border security, public safety, and community stability. They differ from overseas deployments because they can occur in or near the service member's own community. When missions are close to home, the proximity can create confusion for children who may not understand why the service member is physically present but functionally absent. In addition, public sentiment about missions beyond disaster support can be mixed, presenting further possibilities for complex feelings or social stress for children. What remains unchanged is the fundamental importance of stress management and healthy coping to support family stability and service member readiness.

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Understanding the Impact of DOMOPS on Children

For mental health providers, understanding the specific stressors of DOMOPS is essential to supporting the well-being of children of National Guard service members. In addition to typical activation stressors, DOMOPS can present unique challenges that directly influence child resilience and family functioning, such as:

- **Sudden Routine Shifts:** Domestic activations often arise on short notice and can have uncertain end dates, causing abrupt disruptions to family routines.
- **Changes in Household or Family Composition:** Family care plans may require children to transition to the care of a temporary guardian and/or relocate to a new community and school. Transitioning to a temporary guardian can contribute to additional stress and alter a child's sense of stability.
- **Communication Expectations:** Operational security and mission demands may limit the frequency of communication and ability to openly share information. It can be difficult for children to understand these limits.
- **Geographic Isolation:** Many Guard families live far from military installations, lacking the traditional support networks available to active-duty families.
- **Community Exposure:** Younger children may see their parent or other service members on the news or hear community members discussing the mission (e.g., civil unrest or disaster response), which can heighten anxiety or create confusion. Older children and adolescents may be exposed to mixed public sentiment through social media or peers and have complex feelings of their own about the mission or their parent's real or perceived safety.
- **Caregiver Stress:** The psychological well-being of the caregiver is a primary predictor of child adjustment. As childcare and other household responsibilities shift with a service member's absence, caregiver stress can impact children.

Developmental Stress Reactions

Children of different ages signal distress in various ways. Providers should screen for the following behaviors during a DOMOPS activation or reintegration period:

Age Group	Common Stress Reactions
Early Childhood (0–4)	Irritability, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, tantrums, or regressive behaviors (clinging)
School-Age (5–11)	Somatic complaints (stomachaches/headaches), increased anxiety about safety, irritability, and school performance decline
Adolescents (12+)	Social withdrawal, sullenness, declining academic performance, or taking on excessive household responsibilities

How to Help

- **Utilize Psychological First Aid**: Foster an environment of safety, calm, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope.
- **Screen the Family System**: Assess the primary caregiver's mental health, as their coping directly buffers the child's stress.
- **Normalize the Experience**: Educate families that stress reactions are normal responses to changes in routine.
- **Information Management**: Provide age-appropriate context for content, information, or opinions that children may receive through peers, news coverage, or social media.
- **Address Moral Distress**: If a service member is involved in ethically complex DOMOPS, children may sense the parent's moral distress or guilt. Adolescents may feel ambivalence about their parent's mission. Help families engage in open, age-appropriate discussions to normalize human limitations in high-stakes situations.
- **Encourage Routine**: Advise caregivers to maintain consistent schedules (bedtime, school, activities) to provide children with a sense of predictability and safety.

Resources for Families

- **National Guard Child and Youth Program**: Specifically designed to meet the social and emotional needs of Guard youth. Search by state to find your nearest Child and Youth Program.
- **Military OneSource:** Offers trusted information, plus specialized tools and services, including free non-medical counseling, for military children and families.

Additional Reading

- Advancing the Health of the Family Left Behind: Guidance for Providers. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_CTC_Advancing_the_Health_of_the_Family_Left_Behind_Provider.pdf**
- Community Support For Military Children and Families Throughout the Deployment Cycle. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Community_Support_Deployment_Cycle.pdf**
- Becoming a Couple Again: How to Create a Shared Sense of Purpose After Deployment. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_CTC_Becoming_A_Couple_Again.pdf**
- Understanding Post Deployment Stress Symptoms: Helping Your Loved Ones. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. **https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_understanding_postdeployment_stress_symptoms.pdf**

CSTS
Uniformed Services University

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Department of Psychiatry
Uniformed Services University
4301 Jones Bridge Road
Bethesda, MD 20814-4799
www.CSTSonline.org

CDP
Uniformed Services University

Consortium for Defense Psychology
Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology
Uniformed Services University
4301 Jones Bridge Road
Bethesda, MD 20814-4799
https://cdp.usuhs.edu