

# Dads on Duty: Service to Country and Family

By Joe Buehrle



Parents as Teachers™

Our nation's military fathers and their families face an unprecedented context. Between 2001 and 2008, there was a ten-fold increase in the number of Department of Defense troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Belasco, 2009). The high operational pace of the current conflicts – and the resulting lengthy and frequent deployments – can take a toll on children (Chandra, et al., 2009).

As young fathers arrive back home, not only has their family been measurably changed after their long absence, they themselves have also been impacted by their experiences, not to mention the stereotypes and societal pressures to be a “man,” particularly for dads heavily imbued in the military-soldier culture.

San Diego County is home to the largest population of military family children ages birth to 18 in the nation (Promises 2 Kids, 2010). The constant stresses of deployment and reunion put an extreme burden on young military families, and while traditionally, various resources have been put in place for mothers, very few resources are available for military dads. Yet recent research confirms what many in family strengthening roles have known for years regarding language development, attachment, social ability, etc.: The unique role of a father is imperative to the developmental health and growth of a young child (MacDermid, Samper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008).



Recognizing this service gap, in 2008 the Parents as Teachers National Center chose SAY San Diego's Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center for its innovation in collaborating with the military to form Dads On Duty, a program uniquely tailored to young military dads with kids ages birth to 5. To date more than 150 fathers have completed Dads on Duty, which uses evidence-based practices through peer-to-peer group sessions and tailored home visits.

Dads on Duty facilitators quickly learned that engaging military fathers would require some flexibility and creativity. Three quick lessons learned include:

1. The service members' schedule is not their own. This meant evening sessions and a program that did not last more than six weeks were a must to accommodate duty and deployment cycles.
2. Child care, dinner and gift card incentives made coming possible, but it was not why dads came each week. The men genuinely wanted to be better dads. They just needed the affirmation and skills to feel confident.
3. The stigma that men don't want to ask for “help” does not apply to driving directions. Dads on Duty uses a strengths-based peer-to-peer learning model where the men have opportunities to be both teachers and learners.

Overall, when dads are given a safe space to share, reflect, learn, and grow, the responses and feedback from participants have been overwhelming. The data and pre/post tests confirm program successes of fathers toward building protective factors for family functioning/resiliency (e.g., social connections, concrete support, knowledge of parenting, and child development, and nurturing and attachment).



Yet we find the dads' own stories best capture the program impact. One Navy father shared that he did not realize the impact of sea duty and drills (time away) on his child. During a father-child exercise, tears came to his eyes observing what his young son was now developmentally able to do.

In the words of Dads on Duty participant Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Andy Thomas, a first-time father of twin boys, "Sometimes we have to put duty before family even though family is our number one priority." Yet, through Dads on Duty, "aside from getting support, we learn we are not the only people going through stuff like this, and that is very reassuring."

## Stories of Impact

A Marine father shared that, upon returning from Afghanistan, he did not go home. He disappeared for over two days. He had been in such a different mental space for so long, and transitioning back he feared he would be a stranger in his own home and that his young children would not recognize him. Dads on Duty facilitators later observed a massive confidence shift, seeing this strapping young father, little ones in his arms, all with huge smiles, while he animatedly read a children's story to them.

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## References

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Joe Buehrle serves as program coordinator for [SAY San Diego's Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center](#). He oversees the center's staffing, program operations, and fund development. In this role he also serves as the co-chair of the San Diego Military Family Collaborative, a network of more than 30 local governmental and nonprofit organizations. He received his master of social work from the University of Michigan with an emphasis in community organization and social systems.

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