

## **Navy Medicine Puts FOCUS on Building Resiliency for Military Families**

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WASHINGTON (NNS) -- Wartime deployment takes a toll on both the service member and family members on the home front with multiple deployments often compounding existing stress

Post traumatic stress, other mental health conditions, and physical injuries in a military parent are likely to disrupt family roles, sources of care, and instrumental support.

To meet this challenge, Navy Medicine developed Project FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress) to serve the growing need of military families and children.

FOCUS is a family-centered resiliency training program based on evidence-based interventions that enhances understanding, psychological health, and developmental outcomes for highly stressed children and families. In January 2009, the BUMED Family Programs Division was stood-up under the Deployment Health Directorate in the Wounded, Ill, and Injured Warrior Support Command of BUMED and now oversees FOCUS training.

"Project FOCUS is unprecedented within Department of Defense medical commands," said Kirsten Woodward, director of Family Programs Division, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED). "A family programs division has never been established," Woodward added. "It has responded to the importance of family readiness and preparedness through unprecedented programming that Navy Medicine has to offer."

FOCUS is an eight-week, skill-based, trainer-led, intervention that addresses difficulties that families may have when facing the challenges of multiple deployments and parental combat-related psychological and physical health problems.

The program provides structured activities to bridge gaps in shared family understanding that may follow stressful experiences and separations. FOCUS uses family training techniques to highlight areas of strength and resilience in the family and promote family growth to help address daily challenges.

Today, there are nearly two million American children with a parent serving in the military and approximately 900,000 children and youth with one or both parents deployed multiple times. Continued and repetitive deployments can have a psychological impact on family functioning according to research. In the past five years, there has been an increase in both inpatient and outpatient behavioral health admissions for children.

"For the kids, learning 'hands on' with different skills and activities [was significant]." The feeling thermometer was great. For the adults having a place to talk with someone about challenges/issues going on is important," a FOCUS family member said.

In both group and individual family service settings, family members are taught skills to improve emotional regulation, problem solving, goal setting, and communication.

"The trainer's ability to help each of us see situations from each other's vantage points as parents, teenagers, and children [was helpful]. I feel we gained valuable insights and tools– and ended up with more acceptable expectations and understanding," added another FOCUS family participant.

Notably, program participation has resulted in statistically significant increases in family and child positive coping and significant reductions in parent and child distress over time, suggesting longer-term benefits for military family wellness.

In June 2009, the Office of the Secretary of Defense Child and Family Policy determined FOCUS as a best practice program and requested the support of BUMED to expand to select Army and Air Force sites for services. To date over 97,000 service members, spouses, children and community providers have received services on FOCUS.

"Navy Medicine will continue to embrace all the services through Project FOCUS with expansion to other Navy Medicine locations to support psychological health," said Woodward. "Integration with Navy line perspective is being developed."

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