by Mark Katz, PhD

Project FOCUS: Helping Military Family Members Grow Stronger

UCLA's PROJECT FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress) is a trauma-informed, skills-based prevention model designed to build upon the resilient qualities of military family members, many of whom endure enormous stress as a result of their service to our country. Considering the added stresses associated with attention or learning challenges for children growing up in military families, the need for preventive, strengths-based services such as these becomes even more critical.

A central component of FOCUS is its Individual Family Resilience Training model. Eight IFRT sessions are provided by a FOCUS resilience trainer. The sessions are designed to help family members strengthen connection and communication with one another, prepare for and effectively address common sources of stress across the deployment cycle, and construct family narratives known to strengthen a person's response to challenge and adversity.

Practices are also designed to improve skills in the following five key areas:

- **Emotional regulation.** Reactions to stress can vary. Some children are prone to acting out. Others are more likely to hold it in. In either case, learning ways to better regulate and express our emotions can help. Resilience trainers provide family members with proven tools to recognize levels of emotion and to express them in healthier ways.
- **Communication.** Resilience trainers help family members safely voice concerns and safely clarify misunderstandings. Family members are coached on how to set up family meetings that help improve communication and foster greater closeness in the face of stress.
- **Problem-solving.** Resilience trainers also provide family members with tools for anticipating, preventing, and resolving common problems associated with military family life. They include a four-step process referred to as SNAP—**S**tate the problem; **N**ame the goal; **A**ll possible solutions; **P**ick the best one and try it out.
- **Goal-setting**. Resilience trainers provide family members with tools to help set up and support family goals and to successfully work toward achieving them.
- **Managing trauma and stress reminders.** Resilience trainers help family members recognize the signs of traumatic stress exposure, not only in a parent serving in a war zone, but in their loved ones as well. Trainers also provide tools that can help overcome the impact of these experiences.



Within the course of IFRT, family members are also provided a host of other tools, including those that help parents talk to children about changes and transitions, establish effective family routines, manage difficult child behaviors, and remember to take the time to care for themselves.

Gregory Leskin, PhD, serves as director for Military and Veteran Families at the UCLA National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. He has been instrumental in developing and implementing FOCUS for the Marine Corps and Navy, and helped to evaluate its effectiveness. According to Dr. Leskin, initial follow-up studies are very promising. Results show sustained trajectories of reduced psychological health risk symptoms and improved indices of resilience in family members who completed the program. *

*Lester, P., Liang, LJ., et al. (2016). Evaluation of a Family-Centered Preventive Intervention for Military Families: Parent and Child Longitudinal Outcomes. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,* Jan; 55(1):14-24. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2015.10.009. Epub 2015 Oct 30.

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Addressing unique needs through MCCG

FOCUS is only one of several projects that Leskin is involved in to help military families. A second project is the Military Childrens Collaborative Group (MCCG). The program was founded in 2008 by Debbie Nichols from Huntington Beach, California, after she and her husband began caring for her two granddaughters following her daughter's deployment to Afghanistan. Upon her daughter's return, Debbie committed herself to creating a program to address the unique needs of military family members.

The program has several components, among them educating schools, healthcare providers, and community leaders on the needs of children connected to the military. MCCG also works closely with county departments of education to help children of military families transition successfully when enrolling in a new school. This is especially important when you consider that between grades K-12, school-age children from active duty military families will often attend many different schools.

MCCG also provides an app (MilTeenChat) designed to help military teens socially connect with other military teens, gain from peer-to-peer support, and strengthen coping skills. In addition, MCCG's Military Children's Courage Coin Initiative is designed to publicly acknowledge children of the military for their personal sacrifices, their courage, and their support for their loved ones serving our country.

A clinical and consulting psychologist, **Mark Katz, PhD**, *is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center in San Diego, California. As a contributing editor to* Attention *magazine, he writes the Promising Practices column and serves on the editorial advisory board. He is also a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award*

FOR MORE INFO

FOCUS centers are located on various military bases around the USA as well as in several communities. Services are provided free of charge to military families. Visit www.focusproject.org to learn more about FOCUS and their locations.

FOCUS also provides a number of its services online through FOCUS World (focusproject.org/focus-world/). Handouts describing a number of FOCUS tools for enhancing resilience in the face of challenge and adversity are available for download. You can also watch brief videos showing how to address common challenges associated with military family life.

To learn more about MCCG's mission and their other services, visit www.militarychildrenscollaborativegroup.org. The National Military Family Association's article, *10 Things Military Teens Want You to Know,* can be downloaded free of charge.