

A Shared Mission: Collaborative Strategies for Supporting Military Children with Special Needs

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1130-1230 ET**



Presenter

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Jessica Strong, Ph.D., is a military family researcher specializing in the well-being of military and veteran families, serving as a Military Behavioral Health Child Social Worker at the Center for Deployment Psychology at the Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences in Bethesda, MD. In this role, she supports the DoD Child Collaboration Study to identify best practices for enhancing and expanding accessibility to care for military-connected children and adolescents. Dr. Strong earned her doctoral degree in Social Work from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, her master's in social work at Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, NC, and her bachelor's degree in social work from St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN.

Dr. Strong's work has focused on military families, spanning academic, nonprofit, and government sectors, underscoring her commitment to evidence-based practice and meaningful policy change. She has led and contributed to numerous publications addressing topics such as family resilience, the impacts of deployment, and the unique challenges faced by military-connected children. Prior to joining the Center for Deployment Psychology, Dr. Strong led the applied research team at Blue Star Families, designing, executing, and disseminating an extensive research portfolio on military and veteran families that advanced policy and programmatic support for military and veteran spaces, from congressional legislation to local school board policies. She also brings clinical experience in crisis counseling for youth as well as teaching and research experience as an assistant professor in social work at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

As a military spouse and parent to military children, Dr. Strong brings both personal insight and professional expertise to her work, ensuring her research and advocacy are grounded in the lived experiences of the communities she serves.

Disclosures

Dr. Strong has no relevant financial or non-financial relationships to disclose relating to the content of this activity.

The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense, nor the U.S. Government.

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I have no conflict of interest to report.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Evaluate the unique challenges faced by military families with children who have special needs, particularly in the areas of relocation, deployment, and access to care.
2. Explain the barriers and facilitators to care for military and Veteran families, including systemic issues and stigma that impact children with special needs.
3. Analyze innovative solutions and resources available to support military families with special needs children, such as telehealth, peer support programs, and the efforts of organizations like the Center for Deployment Psychology.

Overview

1. Military Families with Children Who Have Special Needs
2. Unique Challenges for Families
3. Barriers and Facilitators to Care
4. Innovative Solutions



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Military Children Who Have Special Needs

Prevalence

23% of all youth have a disorder of **mental health, emotion, development, or behavior (MEDB).**

The prevalence of MEDB diagnoses and mental health care utilization has grown among military-connected youth.

1 in 5 military-connected children have special healthcare needs.



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(Rethy & Chawla, 2022; Hisle-Gorman et al., 2019; Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2014; Perkins et al, 2023)

Military Families with Children Who Have Special Needs

51%

of active-duty spouses with children who live at home report they have at least one child with an impairment, disorder, or disability.

Children's Impairments, Disorders, and Disabilities

Active-duty spouse respondents with children who live at home

(n=2462)

Text: Do you have a child with any of the following conditions?

None , my child(ren) does/do not have any of the following conditions	49%
ADHD	21%
Anxiety disorders	21%
Long-term physical conditions (medical condition, illness, or disability lasting longer than one year)	15%
Learning disability (dyslexia, auditory processing disorder, etc)	13%
Communication disorders (including speech or language impairment)	13%
Autism Spectrum Disorder	9%
Depressive Disorders	8%
Other	6%
Diagnosed behavior problem	3%

Military Family Challenges

Relocation

Most active-duty military families PCS every
2-3 years

81%
of active-duty spouses experienced **at least one PCS move**.

Family Separation

38%
of active-duty families reported **time away from family** was a top concern.

81%
of active-duty spouses report **at least one separation** in the past 18 months.

Separations and Deployments

- Stress and emotional impact
- Challenges in maintaining routines and consistency
- Difficulties with reintegration



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Relocation Challenges

- Social Network Disruptions
 - Loss of emotional/tangible support
- Children's Education Disruptions
 - Curriculum Variation
 - Graduation Requirements
 - Special Education Services
- Healthcare Disruptions
 - Finding providers
 - Navigating new healthcare systems
 - Maintaining continuity of care



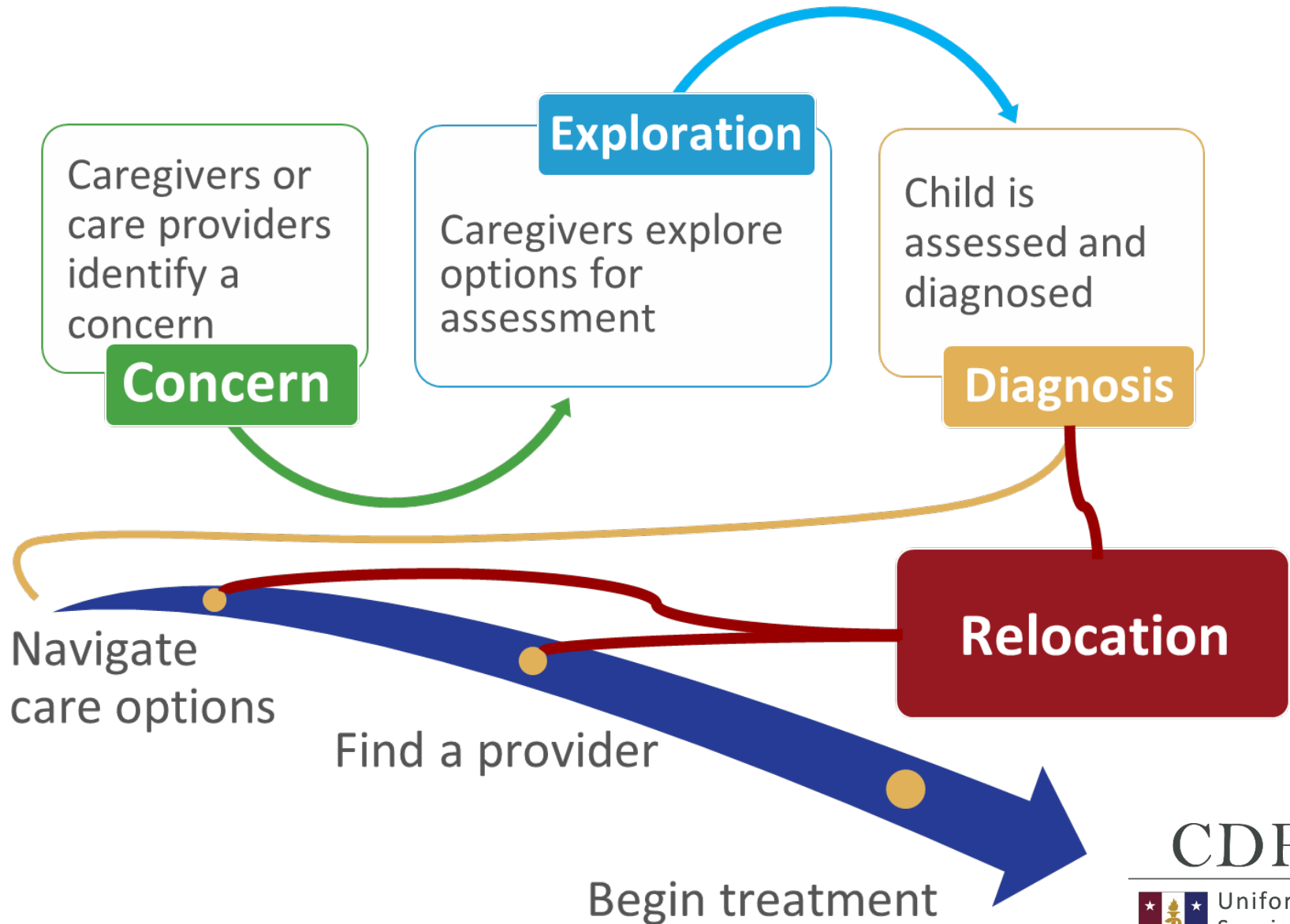
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The Special Needs Journey for Military Families

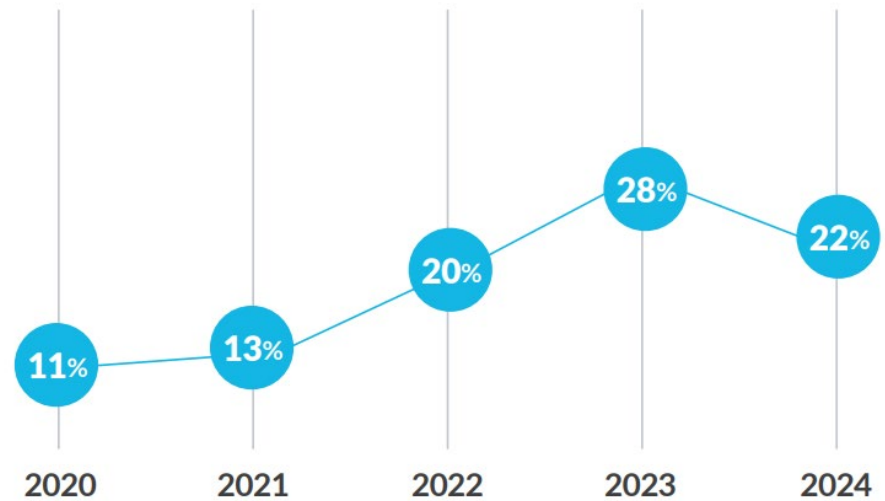


Health Care Access

- “Health Care Access” is an increasing concern for military families.
- Families report decreasing access to care and "ghost networks", especially for mental health care.
- Long wait times and inaccurate provider directories exacerbate the problem.

Figure 1: Access to Military/VA Health Care Reported as a Top Issue of Concern

Active-duty family respondents



Question text: Please select at least five military life issues that most concern you.

(Blue Star Families, 2025)



Yes, every move means new providers and specialists. Sometimes they won't accept the prior doctor's medical history and want to start all over.

- Active-Duty Spouse

Blue Star Families, 2025

The Provider Network search tool was inaccurate and I ended up ... paying to see an out of network provider.

- Active-Duty Spouse

Blue Star Families, 2025

Barriers and Facilitators to Care

Barriers

- Limited continuity of care
- Relocations
- **Lack of trained providers**

The **top reason** active-duty families report for their child **not** receiving mental health care, when they would like them to, is the **lack of available providers**.

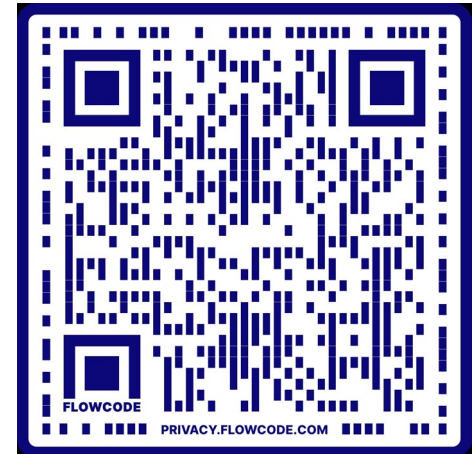
(Blue Star Families, 2022)

Facilitators

- Strong family support
- Mental health literacy
- Supportive school environments
- Access to programs, such as Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP)

- Center of Uniformed Services University
- Military Behavioral Health
 - Training & Education
 - Convening of experts
 - Disseminating best practices and research
- DoD Child Collaboration Study



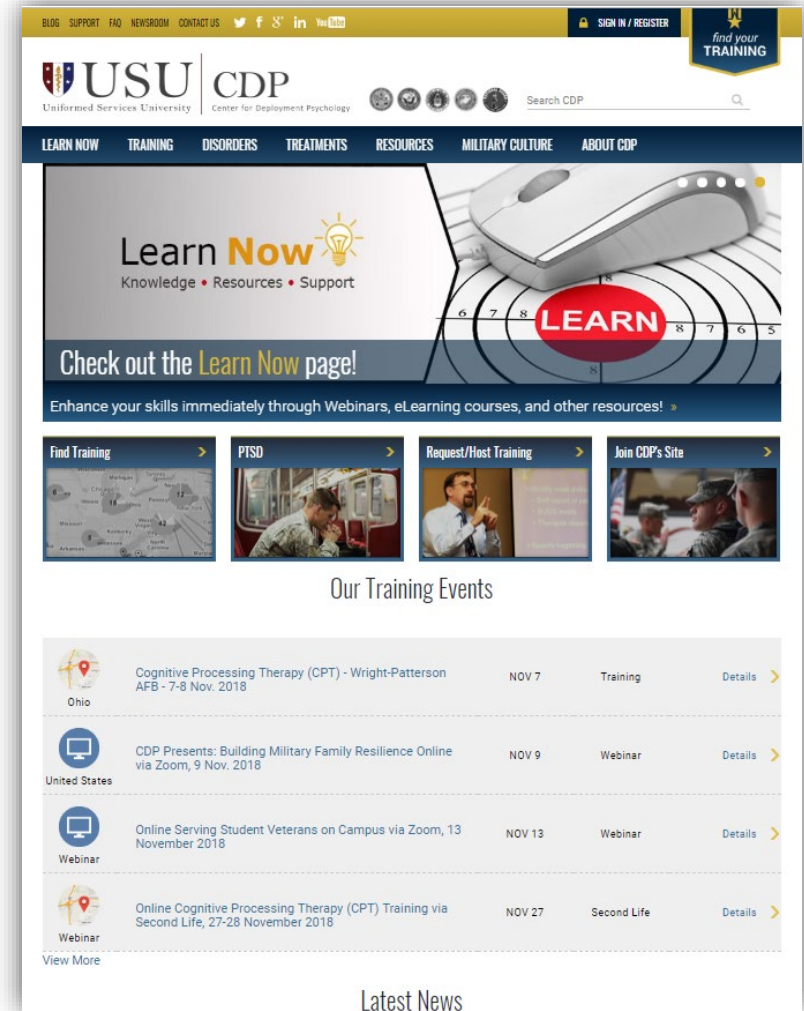
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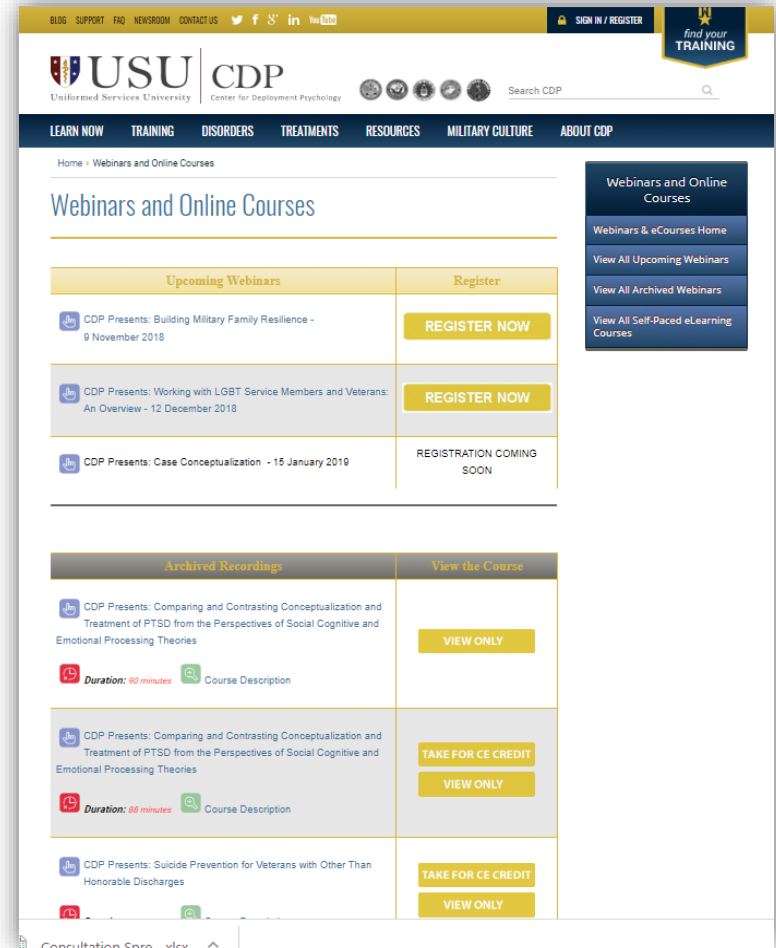
deploymentpsych.org

- Descriptions and schedules of upcoming training events
- Blog updated daily with a range of relevant content
- Articles by subject matter experts related to deployment psychology, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicide prevention, depression, and insomnia
- Other resources and information for behavioral health providers
- Links to CDP's Facebook page and Twitter feed



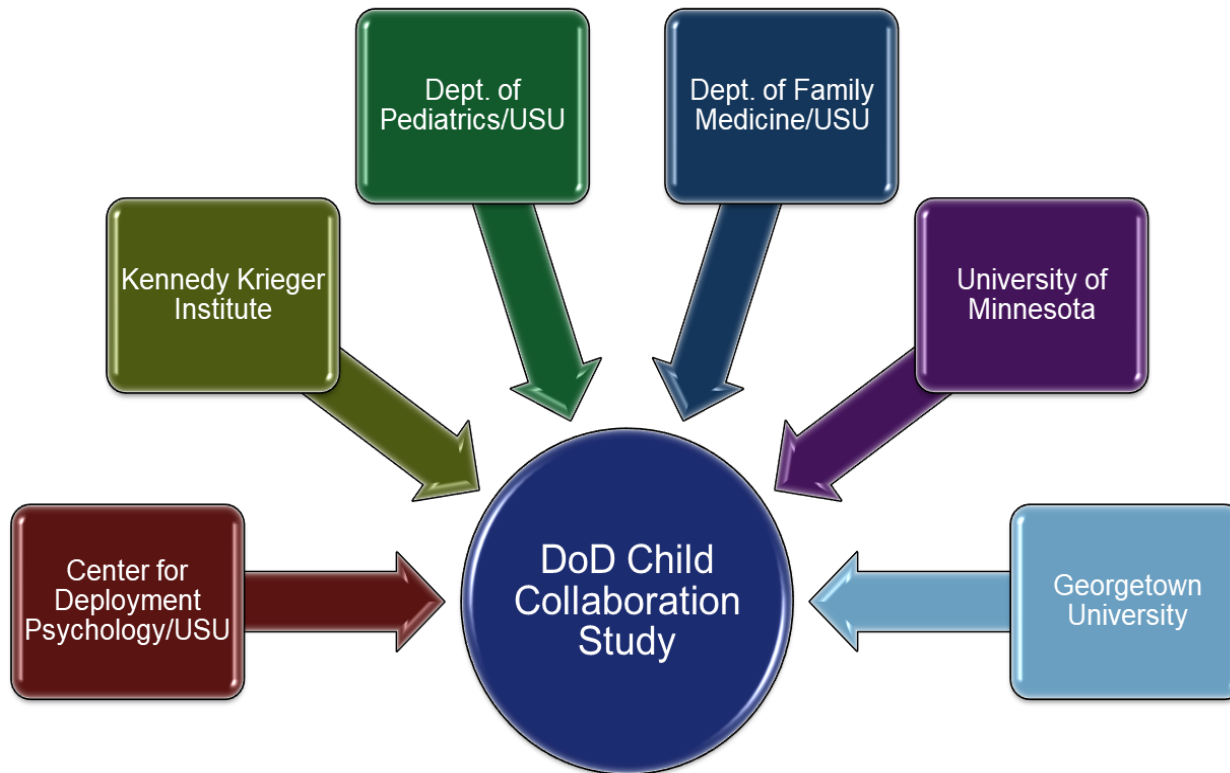
Other Learning Opportunities

- CDP Presents - Monthly Webinar Series
 - Live and archived
 - CEs free for live, small fee for on-demand CEs
 - View archived webinars free for no CEs
- On-demand Courses
 - Military Children
 - Military Culture
 - Deployment Cycle
 - Intro to Prolonged Exposure (PE) and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
 - ...and more!



DoD Child Collaboration Study

Partnerships- 2023



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Project ECHO®

Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes

- **Kennedy Krieger:** Military, civilian providers (interdisciplinary), MEDB early childhood (birth to 8).
- **University of Minnesota:** Community providers (interdisciplinary) supporting children with MEDB in early childhood and school age, special focus on geographically dispersed populations (early childhood-school age).
- **Georgetown University**
 - Pediatric Provider Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO)- focus on age 9-21, military/civilian Primary Care Providers (PCPs)
 - School-based clinician ECHO- Mental Health provider/counselors, teachers, admin

Launching New 12-Week Western & Central Minnesota Focused Project ECHO®

Telehealth to Support Families of Children with Behavioral Health and Mental Health Needs



Event description:
Please save the dates for the following Project ECHO® series: University of Minnesota Telehealth to Support Families of Children with Behavioral Health and Mental Health Needs (ECHO-12 sessions). Hear from and share with U of M Hub Team members in Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Social Work, Early Childhood Intervention and Special Education. This series is open to all, but is likely most relevant to primary care, pediatric, behavioral health, mental health, and educational providers in South East Minnesota.

Topics to be covered include:


1. Primary Care Assessment: Co-occurring Medical Considerations/Overlapping Behavioral Disorders (Seizure Disorder, Medications, Sleeping, Eating, Pain)
2. Supporting Children and Youth with Challenging Behavior
3. Mood Disorders
4. Hyper Activity Attention Disorder
5. Autism Spectrum Disorder
6. Navigating Special Education and Individualized Education Plans (IEP)
7. Supporting Healthy Brain Development
8. Anxiety Disorders
9. ACEs, historical trauma, and trauma-informed supports.

Thursdays, 12:00pm - 1:00pm Feb 27 - May 15
Where: Virtual webinar
Who: Join the University of Minnesota, Masonic Institute for the Developing Brain Hub for didactic and case based learning opportunities.

This ECHO series is free but registration is required. Contact us at telehealth@umn.edu with any questions.

TELEOUTREACH CENTER
MASONIC INSTITUTE FOR THE DEVELOPING BRAIN
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
ECHO

Georgetown University CAP-ECHO Virtual Collaborative Learning Sessions For Providers Supporting Children In Military Families



Date: 2nd/4th Wednesdays of the month, Sept. 11, 2024 - June 25, 2025*
Time: 12pm-1pm EST
Location: Microsoft Teams (live, interactive video conference)
**You are encouraged to attend as many sessions as you are able.*

Join a community of peers and receive specialized guidance through didactic lessons and participant-led case presentations on complex mental health conditions affecting children and adolescents ages 9-21 on military bases and in surrounding communities.

What topics will be included?
Each 3-session mini-series will cover: Screening and Identification; Assessment and Diagnosis; and Treatment, Referrals, and Resources

- Complex ADHD
- Anxiety and Trauma
- Depression and Suicidal Ideation
- Severe Mental Illness
- And additional topics based on your feedback!

Who can participate?
Physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers and other non-physician members of the healthcare team are encouraged to attend and will receive 1.0 CE credit for attending each session.

Registration
Registration is FREE for learners!
To join, use the QR Code or visit bit.ly/capecho

For more information, please contact us at cap-echo@georgetown.edu

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY MedStar Health Project ECHO

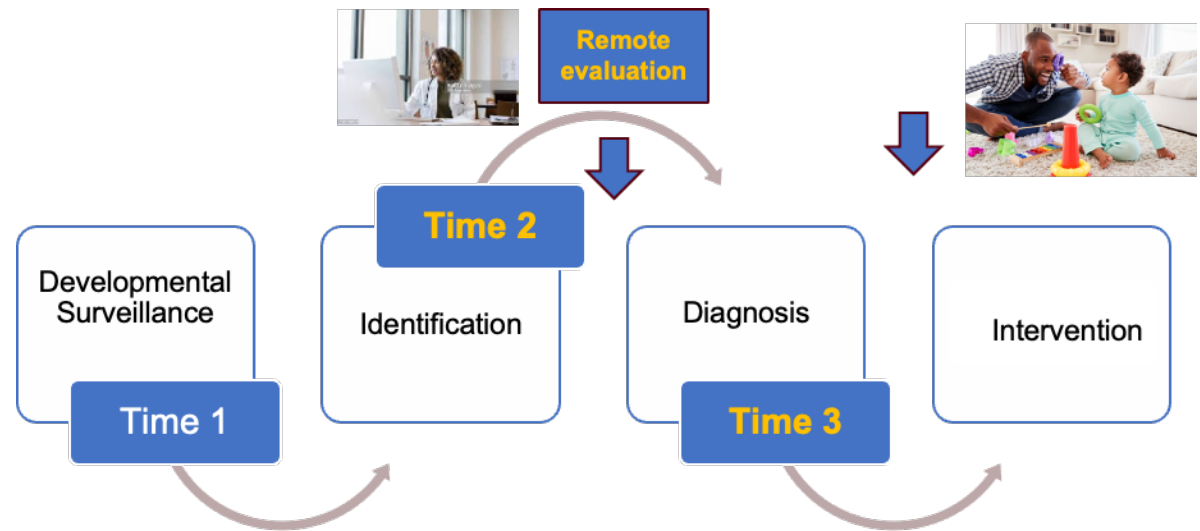
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Bridges2Families: Caregiver Training and Telehealth Platform

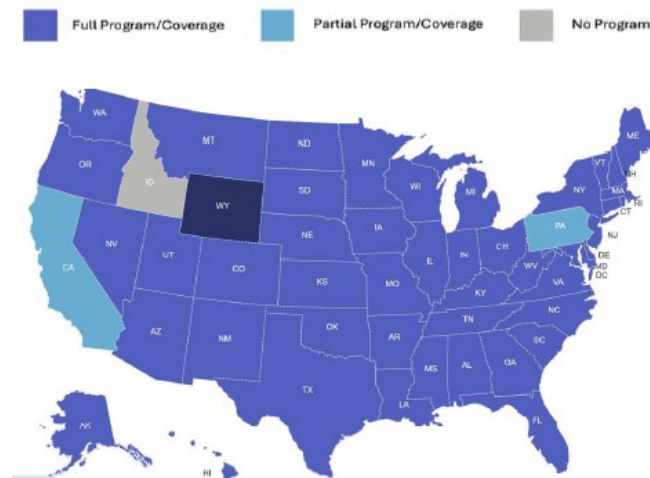
- Early Intervention recommended for children with autism and related Behavioral Health (BH) needs,
- Extensive barriers to BH access = lengthy wait times of 9-18+ months,
- Supplemental support models of synchronous caregiver coaching and training delivered remotely to families in their homes via telehealth leads to improved timing of initial access to care.



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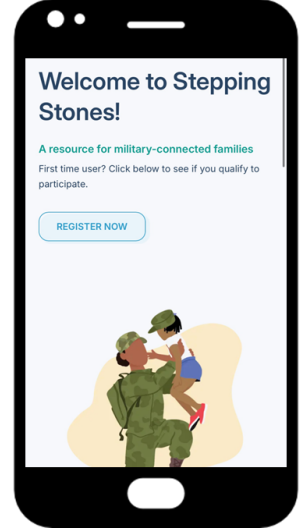
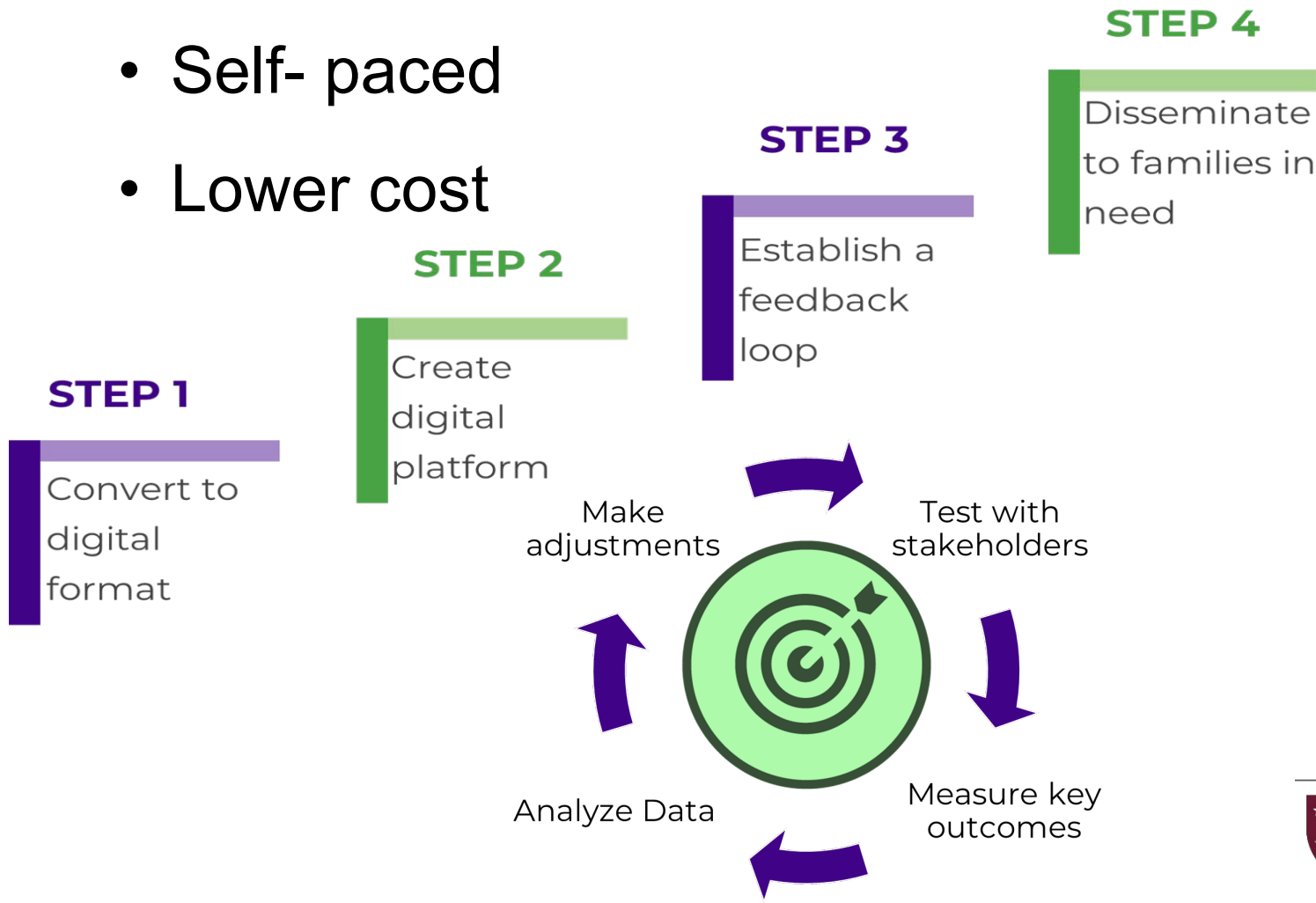
Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Programs (PMHCAs)

- Developed in response to severe provider shortage
- Goal = expand capacity of PCPs to manage Mental Health by providing indirect (curbside) consultation, resource/referral assistance, trainings
- Don't specifically track military kids, little training
- Military primary care physicians may lack awareness and utilization of CPAPs
 - Currently surveying state CPAPs
 - Goal to create trainings for PCPs, CPAP consultants & care coordinators to improve service to military kids



Digital Parenting Platform

- Available anywhere, anytime (nearly)
- Self-paced
- Lower cost



Takeaways

1. Military families with children who have special needs face unique challenges related to relocation, deployment, and healthcare access, which often disrupt continuity of care and education.
2. Barriers to care include provider shortages, stigma, and digital literacy issues, while facilitators involve family support, mental health literacy, and community-based resources.
3. Innovative solutions like telehealth, peer support programs, and training initiatives aim to improve access and quality of care for military-connected children and their families.

Resources

Organization	What They Do	Website
Center for Deployment Psychology/ Uniformed Services University (USU)	Convene the Collaboratory, provide live and asynchronous trainings for providers who treat military families.	www.deploymentpsych.org
Military OneSource	Central online resource for military families on a number of topics, and offers 24/7 support.	militaryonesource.mil
Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)	Provides support for military families with special needs.	militaryonesource.mil/special-needs/efmp/
Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)	Provides programming and advocates for quality education and support for military-connected children.	https://militarychild.org/
Partners in Promise	Advocates to protect the rights of military children in special education.	https://thepromiseact.org/

Center for Deployment Psychology

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Contact Us

Email: jessica.strong.ctr@usuhs.edu

Website: deploymentpsych.org

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/DeploymentPsych>

Twitter: @DeploymentPsych

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QUESTIONS?

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How to Obtain CE/CME Credits

2025 APR CCSS: Cultivating the Wellbeing of our Military Children, Youth and Families

Credits are awarded by session. To claim CE/CME credit for the session(s) you attend, complete the course evaluation and posttest for each session by **11:59 PM ET on Thursday, May 8, 2025**.

1. Visit the main event page at <https://www.dhaj7-cepo.com/content/military-children-and-families-2025> to register for the live event or to log in to your account if already registered.
2. On the main event page, select the “Get Started” tab (located in the menu below the event title on desktop and at the bottom of the page on mobile devices). Note: This tab will not appear unless you are registered and logged in to your account.
3. Under the “Get Started” tab, scroll down to a session you attended and select “Claim credit.”
4. Proceed to take the evaluation and posttest to obtain your certificate after the session has ended.

All completed courses and certificates are available in [your account](#). Refer to your [Pending Activities](#) for sessions you have yet to complete. You must complete the required course items by **Thursday, May 8** to receive credit.

Questions? Email DHA J7, CEPO at dha.ncr.j7.mbx.cepo-cms-support@health.mil.