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Clinical Care Considerations for Military Children and Families:

Unique Stressors and Developmental Impacts of a Parent's Service

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COL Daniel Hart, MD



COL Daniel Hart, MD commissioned in the US Army as an Infantry Officer in 1997 and then in 2012 transitioned to the medical field where he discovered an unexpected passion for treating mental health as a psychiatrist. He graduated from the Uniformed Services University in 2016, finished residency in 2020 and in 2022, as he explained to his children, he finished "29th grade" with the completion of the National Capital Consortium Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship. He now serves as the United States Army Special Operations Command Psychiatrist at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and cares for active-duty Soldiers, children and adolescents.



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Ms. Faith Belt



Ms. Faith Belt serves as the Soldier and Family Wellness Division (SFWD) Chief in the Preservation of the Force and Family Directorate at US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC). She has worked with military families for over 20 years, starting her DA Civilian career with the 1st Cavalry Division at Ft Hood. In 2008, Faith followed her husband to Ft Bragg as he completed the Psychological Operations Q Course. She served as the Family Programs Director at the 82d Airborne and 1st Special Forces Command before joining USASOC in 2020. As the SFWD Chief, Faith oversees USASOC's Family Programs, Family Advocacy Program (non-clinical), Military Family Life Counselors, Personal Financial Counselors, Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) Funded Family Programs and Spiritual Performance, Suicide Awareness and Intervention Program, Transition Program, and Families of the Fallen.



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Learning Objectives

- 1. Describe how the sense of purpose in military service impacts the prioritization of family throughout the course of a career in the military**
- 2. Explain through a developmental lens how parental and military stressors can result in predictable trends in military children**
- 3. Define age and developmentally appropriate strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of a parent's military service and harnessing the benefits for resilience**



Clinical Vignette: The Ranger First Sergeant

- 33yo year old active-duty US Army Infantry First Sergeant (E8) with 14 years of service presents to chaplain due to concerns that his second marriage is “headed down the tubes”
 - History of 32 months in combat
 - Was in 82nd Airborne Infantry Division for 3 years then joined 75th Ranger Regiment and has been there since.
 - X-wife and 13-year-old boy live in Fayetteville; divorced 7 years ago
 - Current wife (seven years) and children, 5g, 4b, 14month old girl are heading back home to Spokane, WA to be with her parents.
 - They are talking about separation.
 - Company is deploying in 9 weeks.
 - 4 weeks of night ops prior to deployment.



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Expectations on a Servicemember

Military:

Self:

Future:

Local Family:

Family of Origin:



Poll-Everywhere

What are example of expectations placed on our servicemembers? Think about these various sources of expectation.

Self:

Military:

Future:

Local Family:

Family of Origin:



Expectations on a Servicemember

Self:

Achieve my purpose

Provide for my family

Future:

Greener pastures

It's lonely at the top BUT

It's good to be king

Military:

Pull your weight

Leader, follow, or get

out of the way

Local Family:

Job first, family is my hobby

Be present for my kids

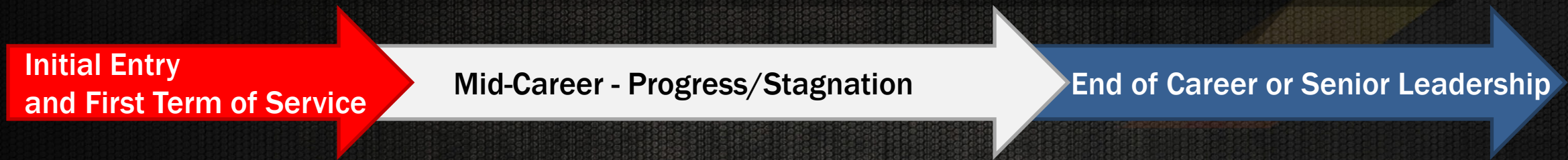
Family of Origin:

Blood is thicker than water

Don't forget where you came from



The Lifecycle of Military Members



0-5 years

Key milestones:

- 1) Pass entry requirements and initial entry training
- 2) Fulfill basic responsibilities of military occupational specialty (MOS)
- 3) Decide on continued service and increasing levels of responsibility

5-18 years

Key milestones:

- 1) Increasing rank
- 2) Increasing responsibility
- 3) Moving from one duty station to another (every 2-3 years)

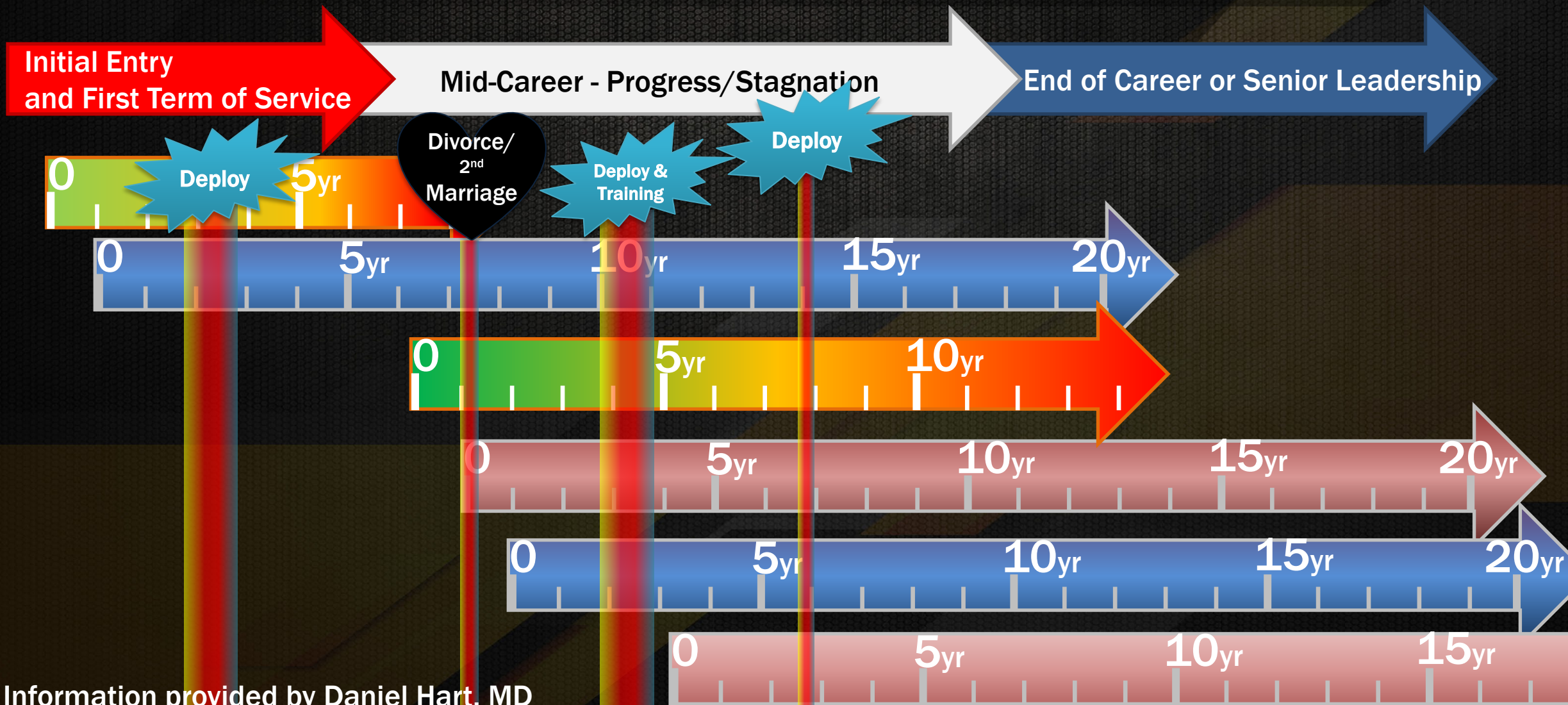
18-25 years

Key milestones:

- 1) Approach retirement or senior leadership
- 2) Moving from one duty station to another (every 1-3 years)



Lifecycle of a SOF Marriage





The Data on Divorce in Military

- Divorce Rates: Military = 4.8% annually vs. General public = 2.5%
- Married female service members' rate 2.5 times higher than male service members.
- 60% higher after deployment to Afghanistan (Pethrus, 2019)
- Marriage 10% less likely after deployment than age-matched civilian counterparts (Pethrus, 2019)
- Post-divorce: increased new-onset posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, smoking initiation, binge drinking, alcohol-related problems, and experience moderate weight gain. However, they were also more likely to be in the highest 15(th) percentile of physical functioning, and be able to deploy within the subsequent 3-year period after divorce (Wang, 2015).
- If remarried, some markers of depression decrease – improved cognition and physical performance and higher stress resilience and socioeconomic advantages, but 25% INCREASE IN DEPRESSION (Hiyoshi, 2015)



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Why Get Married?

Using Poll-everywhere, answer this question:

With frequent separations and evolving military family dynamics, why do you think marriage remains a common milestone for service members?



Benefits of Marriage in the Military

- Improved resilience and stress management through marital support
- Improved military performance
- Retention and longevity in military service
- Better quality of life and financial benefits
- Strengthened resilience through social connections



Stressors

- Deployments
 - Relocation
 - Isolation from family and friends
 - Emotional/mental health issues
 - Marital or relationship issues
 - Financial issues
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- Stress other than deployment resulted in 80% increase in depression for those with income under \$80k per year, 20% increase for those over \$80k (Sampson, 2023)



Recommended Strategies

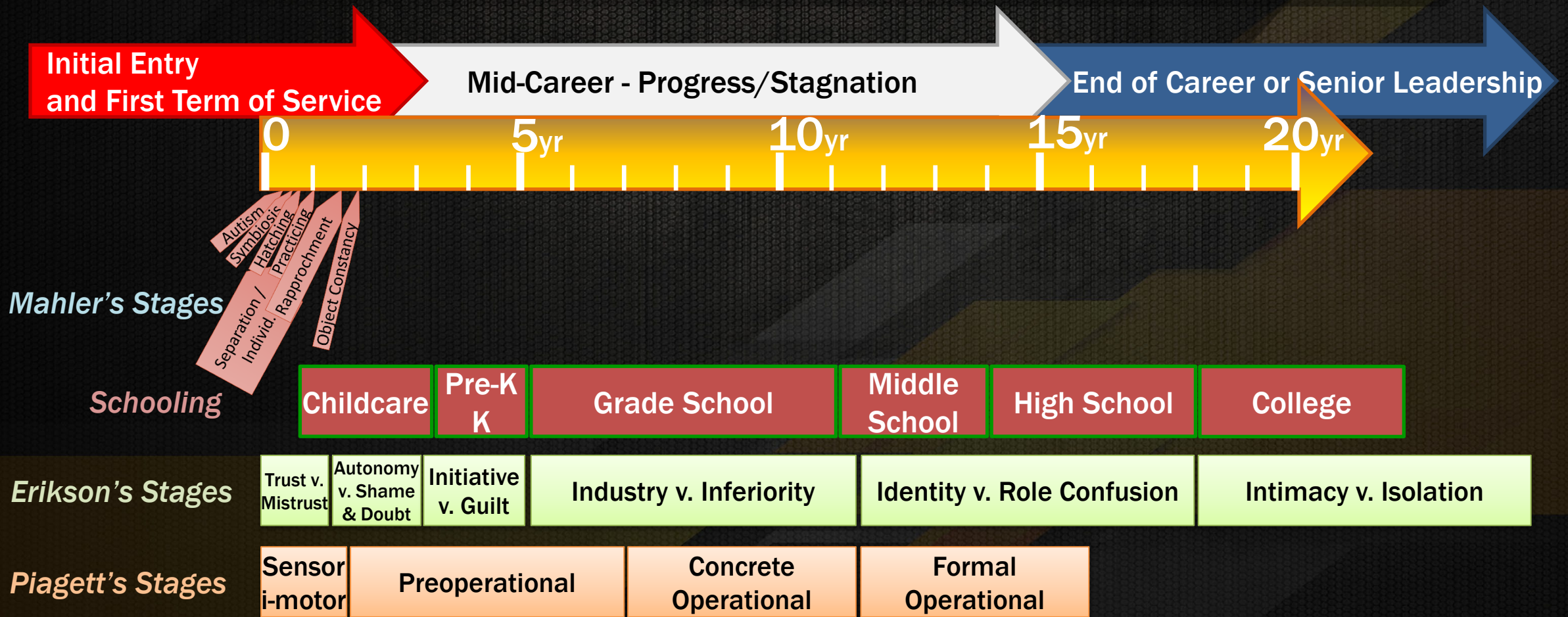
- Unit, Base, Local Area, National
- Engagement in community (sports, parent/teacher association, church, clubs)
 - Ask “What are you into as a couple?”
- Chaplain / Military Family Life Counselor (MFLC)
- Military OneSource
- Embedded Mental Health / Child and Family Mental Health Services
- Local counseling network – [TRICARE.mil](https://www.tricare.mil); [psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)
- Marital Therapy / Couples Counseling

Child Case Examples

- 15-year-old female teen presents with anxiety and sadness due to her weight and bullying at school. She paints a girl's face with short purple hair and comments "she is worried." When the psychiatrist asks, "What's on her mind?" the client responds with tears, "She's worried about what is going to happen to her family." Her dad just returned from deployment and parents are talking about divorce.
- 9-year-old son of a Soldier / single mother is playing violently with toy animals in the clinic office. The psychiatrist plays the role of a baby panda saying, "I am so hungry, and I just want to some ruffage." The client pauses from attacking the panda with his Tyrannosaurus Rex and after thinking for a few seconds, responded with, "Okay, you can have some ruffage, but you CANNOT share it with your mother!"



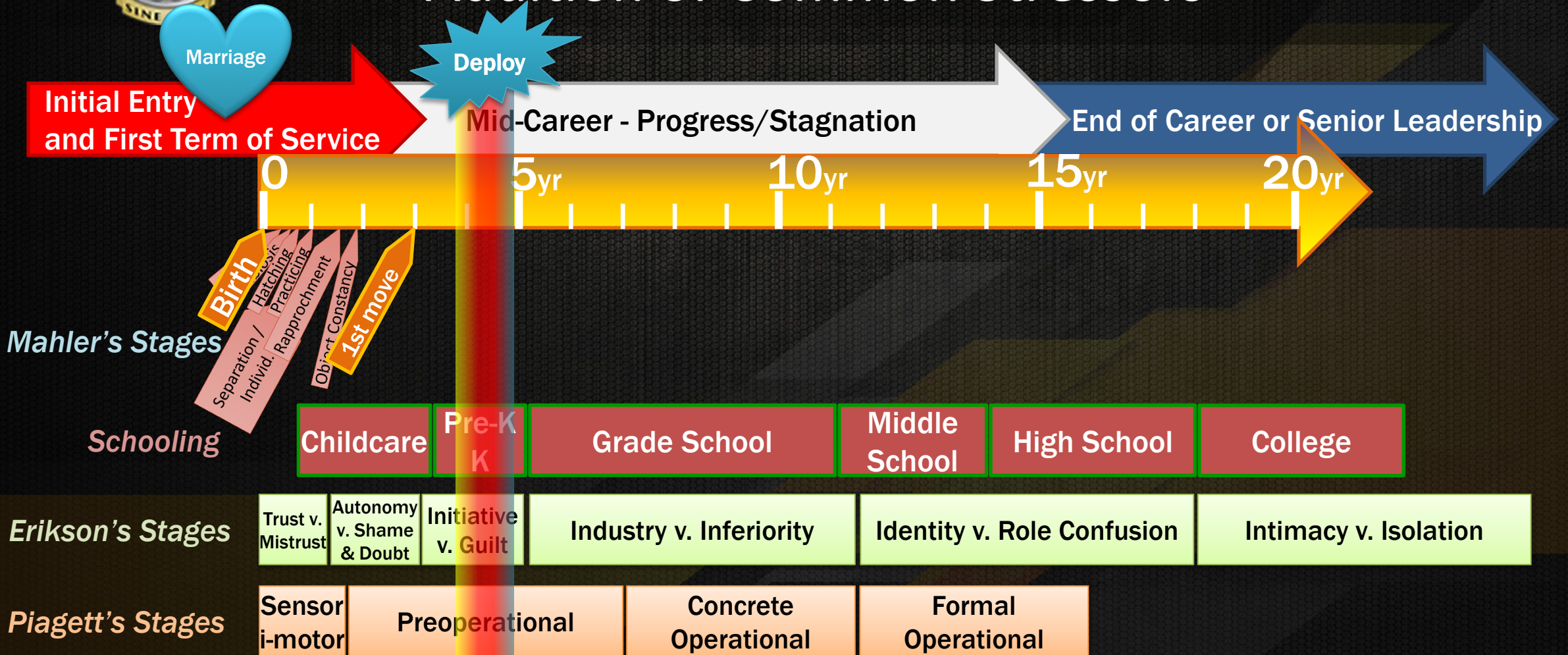
Lifecycle and Development of Dependent Children





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Addition of Common Stressors



Marriage

Deploy

Initial Entry and First Term of Service

Mid-Career - Progress/Stagnation

End of Career or Senior Leadership



Mahler's Stages

Birth
 Separation / Individ.
 Rapprochement
 Object Constancy
 1st move

Schooling

Childcare Pre-K K Grade School Middle School High School College

Erikson's Stages

Trust v. Mistrust Autonomy v. Shame & Doubt Initiative v. Guilt Industry v. Inferiority Identity v. Role Confusion Intimacy v. Isolation

Piaget's Stages

Sensori-motor Preoperational Concrete Operational Formal Operational



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Post-Deployment Impact on Families

Servicemembers report that reintegration periods are hardest:

3- to 6-month period



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Poll-Everywhere

What issues, symptoms or challenges have you seen families face in the first 6 months after a deployment?



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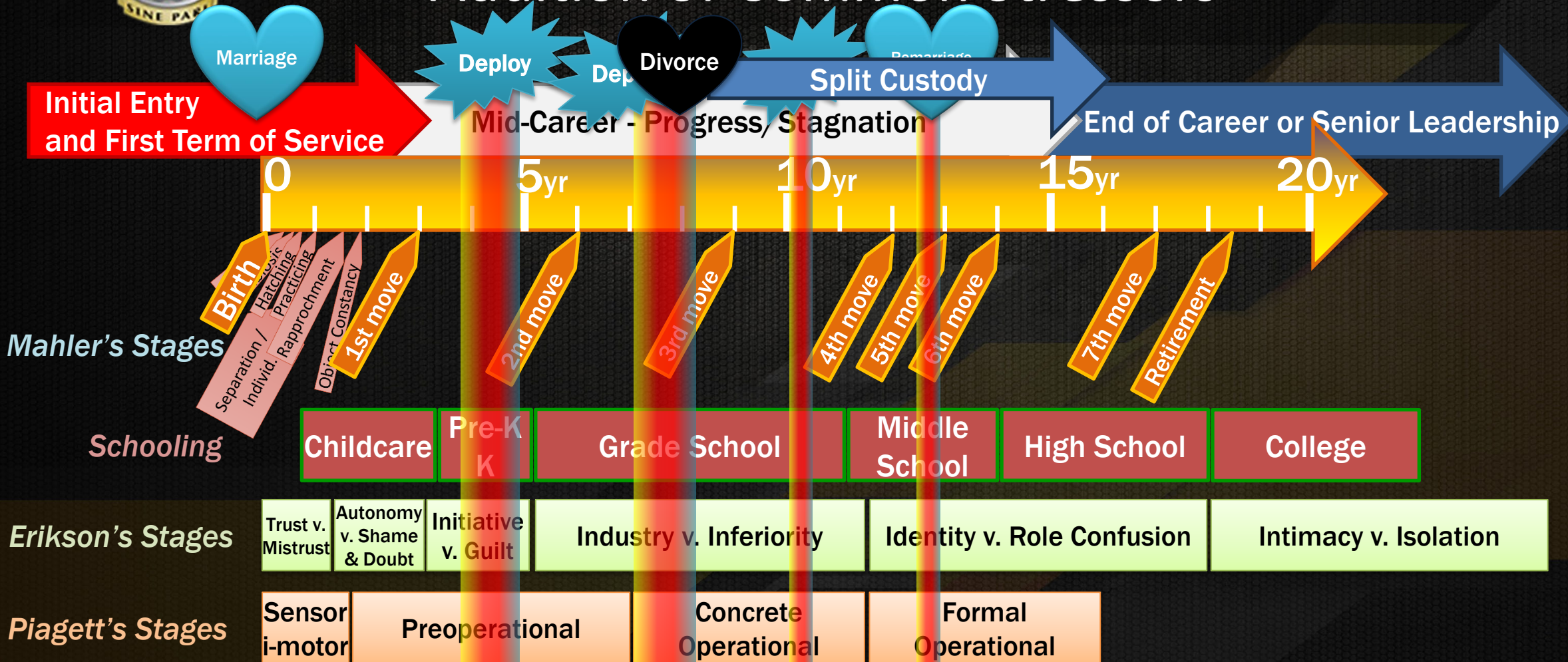
Post-Deployment Impact on Families

Servicemembers report that reintegration periods are hardest: 3- to 6-month period

- 44% - reported readjustment difficulties
- 48% - strains on family life
- 47% - outbursts of anger
- 49% - posttraumatic stress symptoms



Addition of Common Stressors





Impact of Military-Related Stressors

0-2 years: attachment and increased risk of maltreatment

2-5 years: autonomy, confidence and increased risk of maltreatment

5-10 years: academic performance, social learning, distress tolerance, same sex peer-relations and maturation

10-15 years: personality and identity formation, opposite-sex relations and attraction, key social supports, preparation for independence

15-20 years: parent-child dynamic, independence, foundation for parent/adult-child relationship



Parental Empowerment

- **SLEEP/devices** – CBT-I Coach (free app for insomnia), **limit internet access**, limit online time, use restrictions, TVs out of rooms, limit graphic, scary paranormal (up to 10 years) and sexual content
- **Play** – teach and encourage your child to **play outside**
- **Oppositional behavior** – children thrive when parents are **lovingly in charge**. Set boundaries, write out 3-5 family values, write out 3-5 family rules.
- **Marital distress** – work on **communication** even if you are separating or divorcing; try as much as possible to not weaponize your children. Seek out marital therapy / marriage retreat.
- **Bullying/abuse** – Develop **routine communication** and teach about right and wrong treatment and touch
- **Puberty / Sex** – **You are a much better teacher than pornography.**



Highlighted Resources For Children/Families

Online and In-person Care:

TRICARE.mil

Militaryonesource.mil

Psychologytoday.com

Bibliotherapy:

Invisible String – Karst (when a loved one is far away)

Ida, Always – Levis (death of a loved one)

The Rabbit Listened – Doerfeld (stages of grief / handling big emotions)

Feeding the Mouth that Bites You – Wilgus (teens moving to independence)

Therapeutic Tools:

Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) & MATCH protocol

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)

Local Military Resources:

Family Advocacy Program (FAP) clinical care (new parents, anger management, marriage and family)

Military Family Life Counselors

Child and Family Mental Health Services

Family Life Chaplains



Key Takeaways

- Expectations of servicemembers across their career place unique stressors on servicemembers, marriages and families in the military.
- Divorce is higher in the military than in civilian counterparts and twice as high with female servicemembers compared to their male counterparts
- Considering the developmental stage of a dependent child can help understand reactions to stress caused by or influenced by the military member's service.
- Military members and their spouses play the most fundamental role in the development and stability of their child. They should be encouraged and empowered to address key issues that cause risk and distress in their families and in the lives of their children.



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