From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza.

Do you know my dad's in the military? What if you're in the war and something gets stuck, like, a missile? When I grow up, I'm gonna make a helicopter that flies and fights.

These six year olds are a few of our nation's two million military children. In the next hour, we'll hear about their struggles, sacrifices and strengths. The 11 communities around the country and on military bases across the globe and their childhood has played out against the backdrop of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
I'm kind of scared that when he is deployed, he's not gonna come back.

At any point, less than one percent of American adults are serving in the armed forces. So I didn't know much about the military and I certainly didn't know anything about military children. I mean, I love looking at photos of children hugging their parents in uniform after long deployments, but recently I started wondering, what happens in the days before that reunion? What about the days after? And what happens if a parent comes home from service very different or not at all? To answer these questions, I talked to military families across the country.

Okay, this is it, welcome to Camp Lejeune.

We start this hour at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C. It's one of the largest Marine Corp bases in the U.S., about seven times the size of Manhattan.

It goes on forever.

Meet Marla Talley, she's taking us on a guided tour. Talley points out rows of barracks, housing quarters for single Marines and a giant commissary, or general store. I look around at barbed wire fences, rows of armored vehicles and dozens of Marines doing jumping jacks. Most of the Marines here are young, 18 to 25 years old.

They seem like babies to me. Definitely.

Speaking of babies, if this is what you think the military sounds like...

...I found, at military bases, you'll also hear a lot of this...

Forty percent of military children are under the age of five.
Can I have hugs and kisses good-bye? Gonna be good for the teachers, not say, no?

Every day at a child development center, at Camp Lejeune, starting at 5:30 in the morning, there's a steady stream of Marines dropping off their children before they race to physical training. Marines in camouflage uniforms carry diaper bags and stuffed animals.

Give mom a kiss.

Mmm, I love you. I love you.

Lance Corporal Jennifer Rialta signs in her 11-month-old daughter, Persephone, who's been at this center since she was 2 months old.

It allows me to focus on work rather then, you know, worry about what's going on all day.

Rialta loves the fact Persephone is constantly learning here.

She started pulling herself up, she started using her sippy cup, which she still refuses to do at home but she does it here, great.

Persephone is taking part in what's been called The Largest Childcare Program in the country.

Two hundred-thousand children in 800 centers, 3,500 family childcare homes, about 40,000 employees.

That's Barbara Thompson, the director of the Office of Family Policy, Children and Youth for the Department of Defense. She says the military childcare system wasn't always good. In the early 1980s, it was referred to as "the ghetto" of American childcare.
My center was a prefabricated chapel from Southeast Asia that had actually fallen off the ship, into the water. There were no toys and there was just the bin of broken crayons.

There were cases of child abuse and neglect. Some centers had staff turnover of 300 percent, every year. Deborah Phillips, a professor of psychology at Georgetown University, says, there were Congressional Hearings. At the same time, she says, there were more women joining the military, more single mothers and more families where both parents served.

So the need of the military families ramped up for childcare at exactly a time when these terrible conditions of childcare were being exposed.

That led to the Military Childcare Act of 1989, a law that tried to systemically improve the cost, convenience and quality at these centers.

That's Marla Talley's way of saying, the childcare system was transformed. She oversees childcare at Camp Lejeune, Talley says, attitudes slowly began to shift and commanders began to recognize how important childcare was to the military's primary mission, defending the country.

Whether they're on the rifle range, they're firing or they're qualifying, it requires them to concentrate on exactly what's happening, so that they'll be prepared for their ultimate goal, which is going to war. I can't go and train if I'm worried about whether or not my child is well cared for.

The child development centers, just on this base, can now accommodate 1,600 children, from newborns to five year olds.

Well, I had a pediatrician friend at the Naval Hospital and he said, there's two things that Marine's do well, they shoot their guns and they make babies. And when they come back, you can almost watch the calendar, within nine or ten months after the units return, then there's lots more babies being born.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]
CORPORAL JACOB KING
What do you got? You got keys?

MR. GRAYSON KING
Yeah.

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
Two-year-old Grayson King is toddling about in his Superman shoes before being scooped up by his dad, Corporal Jacob King. He's a single father who works long hours on anti-tank missiles.

CORPORAL JACOB KING
This place stays open as long as I'm at work without charging more.

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
The military subsidizes almost two-thirds the cost of childcare. Ninety-seven percent of military childcare centers have been accredited by an independent organization. That means they've been rated high quality compared to just 10 percent of civilian ones.

[SONGBITE OF SONG]

MS. DELORIS CARTER
C, D, E, F, G...

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
Here at Camp Lejeune, teacher Deloris Carter works with infants, she's dancing up a storm and waving colored scarves in front of two babies, looking up at her.

MS. DELORIS CARTER
Oh. Come on babies. Come on my friends, come on...

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
Carter says, her dancing has a purpose, the babies are hearing different rhythms and sounds.

MS. DELORIS CARTER
...yes, move your leg, move your leg...

MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
Learning is very intentional, even infants have individualized lesson plans.

MS. DELORIS CARTER
To help them to learn to reach, grasp and pull using their strong muscles in their legs.
Teachers in the military are paid more than teachers at civilian childcare centers, $15 an hour versus less than $10 on average. They also get military benefits, everything from retirement and vacation, to healthcare and access to the gym. And unlike their counterparts at civilian centers, they have to complete a certain amount of professional development. Experts say, the lynchpin of the system is, the more training you do, the more money you make. Teachers, Deloris Carter and Kristie Tegtmeier say, they love it.

There's always training, always.

I mean, they pay for the training for you to make more money. They're always wanting you to better yourself. They want...

They want you to be the best at -- yes.

...that you can be. Yeah. Just like they teach in the Marine Corp, be the best you can be.

Teachers here have to go a step further, they receive specialized training in how to help military children who face unique stresses, including their parents deploying for long periods of time. One way teachers help them process their feelings is by reading books that connect with their experiences.

And mommy works at...

...at work, but what kind of job do you think she's doing?

She's doing duty, the military. We'll always keep mommy where?

In our hearts, we'll always keep mommy in our hearts.

Hearts, and daddy.
There is little research on how the youngest military children are affected by war, but studies suggest, children with a deployed parent are more likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems. Teacher Kristie Tegtmeier says she's seen children become withdrawn or cry or get angry for no apparent reason.

One time a child came into the room, just very quiet and said to me, my daddy left and I said, okay. And he looked at me, said, I promise I'll be good, I'll be good. You have to teach them that it is not their fault. Hi Nicole, you laying down for nap? Where's your, your animal?

Teachers also work with them on coping techniques, deep breathing, identifying emotions and learning to ask for help.

Do you remember the card that we wrote and you weren't sure if I was gonna be able to spell daddy? I did though, didn't I? Do you remember what you drew on there?

Daddy.

It was daddy. What, where is your daddy?

Afghanistan.


And kisses.

And kisses.

Research shows, there's an uptake in child abuse and neglect during deployments, so teachers are trained to recognize and report such incidents.

Sometimes the kids will tell you that daddy's really quiet or daddy gets mad at me over little things and you just have to kind of talk to them and say, you know, it isn't you. You know, he's having a bad day.
It's 6:00 o'clock in the evening and Marines are striding back into this childcare center to pick up their children.

Gabby, you ready to go home goofball?

Marine Jennifer Rialta holds her 11-month-old daughter Persephone close, as they get ready to go home.

I love picking her up, it's like the best part of my day, every day.

Deborah Phillips of Georgetown University says, the military has shown us, change is possible.

This amazing transformation from a system that was really in serious trouble, to the best childcare system in the country has been referred to as a Cinderella story.

If childcare is Cinderella at the ball, the Department of Defense is the Fairy Godmother, spending more than $800 million last year on childcare. But it's not clear whether this bounty will continue. Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military spending was at its highest level in 2010. Since then, that amount has steadily decreased. Eileen Huck, with the National Military Family Association is worried cuts will trickle down to childcare centers. And for service members already on long waiting lists for childcare, although stationed far from their extended families, that will make a big difference.

If you have a doctor's appointment, you can't ask your sister to come by and watch the kids for a little while, you can't call on grandma, necessarily, to come and babysit.

The military's childcare system has come a long way from the days when it was considered, "the ghetto," of American childcare. The big question, what lies ahead in the next few years and whether the next generation of military children will also be able to attend what are now considered, some of the nation's best centers for our youngest learners.
After the break, schools that report to the Pentagon, not the Department of Education.

If you walked into my classroom and you asked, how many of them knew somebody that was either wounded or killed in combat, every hand would go up. You're not going to find that in public school.

That's just ahead on, "Breaking Ground: Military Children," a production of WAMU in Washington and PRI, Public Radio International. I'm Kavitha Cardoza, we'll be right back.

From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Today we're learning about our nation's military children. We look at how their lives have been shaped by more than a decade of war, punctuated by long separations when their parents deployed. Ten-year-old Isis Langoria lives in Fort Bragg in North Carolina. By the way, that sound you hear, is the rustling of tissues.

He's the best dad I could ever ask for.

Isis' father has been deployed twice to Iraq and was gone for three years.

My dad has been blown up, shot and it gets me scared that he might not come back.

And how do you deal with it?

Well, on his first deployment, he got -- he came back with this thing we call a Daddy Bear, it's a bear that has his voice recorded in it and every time I miss him, I just press the button and it talks to me and...

What does it say?
It's just saying how much he loves me and how much he's proud of me in what I've accomplished.

Isis says, she missed playing basketball in the yard everyday with him. What about in school?

I try to stay focused on my schoolwork because I know that my -- that's what my dad would want me to do.

Most of our countries military children go to public schools but Isis is one of a small percentage of military children who attends schools run by the Department of Defense Education Activity. They're also called DOD schools. There are 180 of them around the world and they serve some 80,000 children. These schools report to the Secretary of Defense rather than the Secretary of Education. They are little known but may have important lessons to teach us.

Then I think that was the only center I wanted to talk to you about.

Fort Bragg is one of the largest Army installations in the country. At one of the elementary schools on base, Irwin Intermediate, children have had their parents deploy at least four times, on average, in the past decade. Julie Allen teaches the third grade...

And remember on this one, mistakes are proof that you are...

So please make sure that you give it your best go, deal?

Allen checks in with her eight-year-old students, as they rotate through different tables, solving math problems. They use blocks, computers, even a board game.

And remember you're looking for the largest difference. Can you visualize what a triangle looks like?

Got it. That's my [unintelligible]
Whoo-hoo.

Students at DoD schools do very well academically. On the 2013 national assessment of educational progress test, often referred to as the nation's report card, DoD schools did better on average than public schools on both reading and math tests for fourth and eighth graders. And in reading DoD students in both grades score at the same level as the top performing states in the nation.

Those results are even more striking when you consider that approximately a third of military children move every year and 45 percent of students in U.S. DoD schools are low income. So how did they do it? Turns out, members of Congress were wondering the same thing so in 2000, they asked Claire Smrekar, an associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University to investigate. When Smrekar began her research, she expected an easy explanation for the high test scores.

Military children have at least one parent who's working, for starters. They also have safe, stable housing and healthcare.

And I thought it was going to have to do with kind of a strict governance and we found that there was so much more complexity.

Smrekar says DoD school success starts with strong effective teachers.

Oh, it's a hard one, huh?

As a journalist who covers urban education, I was surprised that of the 50 teachers at Irwin Intermediate, only one is new. I was even more surprised Julie Allen doesn't consider herself a veteran teacher.

I've worked with different student populations, you know, only eight hers.

You've done eight years, which, to me, is, like, a really long time for a teacher.
But when I meet Allen's colleagues, I learn that a really long time means something completely different in military schools.

My name is Julie Givings. I have taught for 19 years.

I'm Grace Merkel. I have 36 years.

I'm Donna Truelove. This is my 27th year.

A big reason teachers rarely leave the DoD system is because the pay and benefits are much better than in surrounding civilian schools.

I'm Deborah Bailey. This is my 29th year of teaching and my 17th year at Fort Bragg. If I went back to the county now, I would take over a $30,000 a year pay cut. It's probably closer to $40,000.

Smrekar says there's a long-term philosophy when it comes to education in these schools.

The commitment to the long-term is a clear, distinctive and unusual quality that we don't see in civilian school systems. Part of that is because they are somewhat politically insulated. And they are not subject to the kinds of political whims or rhetorical wars that civilian schools are sometimes subjected to.

At DoD schools the curriculum, textbooks, online resources and graduation requirements are the same, no matter where you live. Next year all military schools will adopt the Common Core standards, making it easier for military children who move every two to three years. Otherwise, Smrekar says, principals operate fairly independently. That kind of autonomy is often compared to how charter schools operate.

But unlike charter schools, military schools have teachers' unions. And union officials and school leadership actually seem to appreciate each other's purpose. Vera Morgan represents 350 teachers on this base.

It's a great give and take from both of us. They have great people.
Principal Ginny Breece agrees.

We do not have an adversarial relationship at all.

Another reason for the DoD schools' success is the system is well funded. Mary Ellen Cravotta is showing off the library.

I have spent over $20,000 just this year on books and DVDs. Our resources are unlimited.

According to one study, students in DoD schools receive nearly 20 percent more funding for each student, compared to public schools. Principal Ginny Breece says there's also more support in terms of personnel.

I've got two full-time counselors, a full-time nurse, I've got a speech therapist, an occupational therapist. We have 20 percent of kids on special education and we have a lot of resources to support those kids.

Ginette Pena's husband has served for 22 years in the Army. Their children attend Irwin Intermediate.

I have a 12-year-old, an 11-year-old and a 9-year-old.

You've got three boys?

I do. I have three boys. I do.

Oh, my God. How…

It's always a fun day at our house. Every -- as soon as we walk in. I know my husband -- he loves it though. He says he has to stretch before he comes into that house because that's the first thing they do, is jump on him.

Pena says her husband has had multiple deployments and has missed half of his 12-year-old son's birthdays.
Well, my son would say his stomach was hurting. And the teacher said he started laying down a lot on the floor. And I said, "Yeah, I don't know why he's doing that." Well, come to find out from the counselors, he was just missing my husband. And he didn't know, I guess, how to say I miss Daddy.

Pena says she reassured her son all the time, but...

As much as we went through it, on a map, this is where Daddy is, you know, he's over the Atlantic Ocean. He's over here. He said, "Daddy's lost." And you know, that broke -- it still hurts because he'll be deploying again.

He's going to be deploying again?

Yeah, shortly. And it takes a -- it takes a toll on families.

Have you told your children about your husband going off again?

Yes. First thing my son said, "You're going to miss my birthday again, huh?" You know, so he knows. And we try to do what we have to do, make the best of our situation.

She's grateful that as the family prepares for big changes at home her son's school will remain a source of stability in their lives. The same sense of togetherness that Fort Bragg schools have can also be found at Quantico Middle/High School, a Department of Defense school in Virginia. That's where I meet 16-year-olds Destiny Oakley and Malik Rupert and 17-year-old Emily Sanborn. We're sitting outside in the sunshine.

We're on the Junior ROTC shooting range.

That's the shooting range for members of the Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps. They must see me looked surprised at the bullseye targets and guns around us because Destiny laughs.

It's part of their grade and they get medals. I would never have thought that schools teach kids how to properly shoot a gun.
There are lots of ways the school is different from a public school. For starters, it's much smaller.

I came from a public school where my sophomore class was 300 students and now I have 30 in my junior class. And that's a really nice thing about this small school, is that you can make the varsity sports teams, even if you're absolutely awful like me.

What do you think people can learn from military children?

You may have friends who are not military, who say, "Well, I don't want to go to my grandma's house for Thanksgiving." And it just almost seems like a pain to them. You just think to yourself, maybe you shouldn't take it for granted. I think that's something that maybe military kids understand more, is cherishing every moment that you do have because you don't know what moments you might not have together.

These schools seem to be relatively insulated from some of the most persistent problems facing civilian schools. For example, the black/white achievement gap at DoD schools is significantly lower than the national rate. And in AP exams, black students at these schools outperform their peers nationally. Researcher Claire Smrekar says the reason can be traced back to the 1950s.

The military school system was really the first system to racially integrate their schools because they knew they could not have a racially-integrated military if the children of their military members attended racially-segregated schools.

She says while the military culture of racial integration may not be perfect, it still sets higher expectations for everyone. And Smrekar says that's true from the top down. During her research she asked principals...

What's your typical attendance for your parent/teacher conferences? And they looked at each other and they said, "Well, 100 percent, of course." Because the military command insures that all military members have time and make time to walk over and talk to their children's teachers.
At Quantico Middle/High School, daily attendance is around 94 percent. Quantico's assistant principal, Daniel Mulhern, says discipline issues in his high school are almost nonexistent.

I had 10 disciplinary concerns this entire year.

According to Mulhern, those include students who came late to school, talked in class, and had a cellphone ring during a lesson. In seven years, there's only been one fight. Why? Principals Johnson and Mulhern say, in the military parents can get into trouble if their children misbehave.

The expectations from the command to the military service member is to manage their family.

There's seldom times that I have to call the parents. I always have full support. There's never been a "Well, you're picking on my son or daughter." "We got it, Mr. Mulhern. We'll have a discussion with our son or daughter this evening."

This educational culture, a mix of high expectations, plenty of resources, strong parental involvement and a focus on long-term planning has paid off for DoD schools. But there are changes on the horizon. Recently, as bases built overseas during the Cold War have been closed, more than 40 of these Department of Defense schools have been shuttered. And the majority of the remaining DoD schools need extensive renovation and repair.

The Pentagon has commissioned the RAND Corporation, a think tank, to look at how it can best balance cost and quality at DoD schools in the U.S. Each one will be looked at independently, and while some schools may see no changes, others could be closed or turned into charter schools.

The vast majority of our nation's 2 million military children attend public schools. On average, these children can move up to nine times before they graduate high school. And figuring out different rules and different school districts can be awfully confusing.
At Leckie Elementary, a public school in Washington D.C., more than 150 children come from Joint Base Anacostia Bolling, less than two miles away. Daniel Dunham is the school liaison officer for the Washington region, meaning he helps military families navigate the public education system.

And do you know about the Interstate Compact?

I don't think so.

Okay. So let me get you a form.

Because military families move so much, most states have signed on to this voluntary compact, which makes certain allowances for active duty families. For example, school districts can waive course requirements for graduation if a student has already taken a similar course in a different state. The compact also promises that special education services will continue when students change schools. And that deadlines for extra-curricular activity tryouts are waived. But often these rules haven't filtered down to the local level, so Dunham is helping to get the word out. He's a former military child himself.

When I grew up, we didn't have school liaison officers. I can recall having nightmares, even after I started teaching high school, about not graduating. Because, you know, I moved from place to place. I always had this fear that I wouldn't have enough credits and I would have to repeat a year.

Barbara Williams is a liaison at the Army base, Red Stone Arsenal, in Alabama. She recalls one student who loved his small rural school, but was transferred to a new public school with nearly 600 students in his grade.

He could not make friends. His grades dropped tremendously. He was making A's and B's in his school, to D's and F's in this school.

Judy Cromartie is a liaison who helps children transitioning to public schools around Naval Station Mayport, in Jacksonville, Florida.

I've known high school students to each lunch in the bathroom the first three days they're at school or they just don't eat.
Cromartie and other school liaisons pair students with lunch buddies, tutors and after-school activities. And sometimes, Cromartie jokes, she has to solve issues that have nothing to do with education. For example, the local public school district cancelled the bus service because of budget cuts. And students on base had to start walking to school. She says it was only a few blocks.

However, to get there they would have had to walk by one strip club, walk by another strip club before they got to this middle school. So I called the district office and suggested that maybe 14-year-old boys -- that would not be a good way to start their day. It's just a thought.

It might depend on whether you're the school liaison officer or the 14-year-old boy.

Moving so often is exciting for many military children. They get to explore new cultures, learn new languages and make friends all over the world. But it can also be very disruptive. Moving means constantly being the new kid. Fifteen-year-old Emily Budd goes to a public school in New Kent, Va.

Emily feeds her pet rabbit, when her little brother pops his head into the bedroom.

Go see Momma. Thank you. Okay. Ever since I got the rabbit, it's like my room is free territory for anyone. I'm like, no, that's not how it is.

Her father is a lieutenant colonel in the Army, and so her large, loving family has spent several years abroad in South Korea, Germany, and, most recently, Armenia. They moved back to the U.S. a year and a half ago and settled in a small, rural community.

When someone like me comes in, who's been to 23 countries and speaks three other languages, I'm the odd ball out.
Emily is learning not to say a lot about her travels, but having to explain herself constantly wore her down.

It just, like, came on as this wave of resentment, and so I started to cut.

Emily would cut or injure herself.

I got really depressed.

You were 13?

Um-hum.

And how long did that period go on for?

It's still going on, actually. I ended up in the hospital January 21st, because I was going to try to kill myself.

Emily texted three of her friends and told them she was going to overdose on sleeping pills. To make a long, traumatic story short, she was hospitalized for a week. She's now on the road to recovery. She's in counseling, has made a few friends and pours her heart into writing poetry.

What would have made it better for you?

An unlimited supply of money so I could buy a plane ticket back whenever I wanted to. I don't know. I mean, back in Europe and in Armenia, like, I had a distinct place. Like, does that make sense? I just knew where I belonged. But then I got to the U.S., none of these people cared about where I'd been. I didn't know how to react. I think that was the biggest part of it, was that nobody understood me.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]
Many military children are resilient, but there are also a lot like Emily in public schools across the U.S. who experience difficulties. Research suggests just having a parent deployed could increase a child's chance of depression, bullying and suicidal thoughts by between 27 and 50 percent above a non-military child. And public schools, which educate the overwhelming majority of military children, have a big role to play in their well-being.

We have Oceana Naval Air Base, Portsmouth Naval Center, Norfolk Navy Shipyard, Fort Story/Little Creek…

The Virginia Beach City public school system educates 20,000 military children. Jill Gaitens is the director of military support services.

We're literally surrounded by the military community.

Every branch of the military has a presence here. But even with all these children, she says teachers sometimes don't understand that even a simple question like, where are you from, can be confusing to a military child. She gives the example of her own military family.

I'm from Michigan. My husband's from Wisconsin. I have one son from Arizona, one son from California, one son from Okinawa.

Virginia Beach has hired additional counselors, created military mentoring programs and provided more teacher training. Because what happens outside the school affects the children inside. A few months ago there was a helicopter crash into the water just off Virginia Beach.

There were four service members that passed away that day. For a little while we didn't know the names of those service members, but all of our students knew that a helicopter crashed. Many of our students have fathers that fly in those helicopters and fly in those jets.
Seventeen-year-old Christopher Penn, at Ocean Lakes High School in Virginia Beach, is making a mousetrap car and there's a lot of sawing and nails and talk of wheel alignment involved. Christopher wants to do well in the military aptitude test because he wants to specialize in artillery, so his math skills have to be good.

I want to serve my country. I've had this idea since the seventh grade.

Like many military children, he has family members who have served. His father was in the Army, and Christopher says he can't wait to wear the Marine Corps uniform.

I'll feel proud, you know? That uniform looks great. I know my girlfriend will love it.

Christopher is pretty open about his military connections, but Gaitens says that's not often the case. Students don't volunteer that information, either because they want to fit in or because they're told not to.

We have a lot of Special Forces in our community. The children would know not to discuss it. And there's situations where you don't want to tell your child what you do.

The Virginia Beach School system has added a simple box on registration forms that now allows them to track military children in school databases. Mary Keller, president of the Military Child Education Coalition, is pushing for a similar system nationwide.

Everybody can say, "Well, we're military friendly." Great. What does that mean? We are in this black hole of data of understanding, you know, about the children whose parents are serving.

Keller says having families check an extra box when they're enrolling doesn't cost money and it helps schools understand where to direct resources. A school that can identify its military children can support them emotionally as well. Ron Avi Astor, a professor at the University of Southern California, has studied the effects of war on children, particularly in the Middle East.
00:34:16  MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
He says there's a chasm between the civilian population and the military in the U.S. that makes many children feel like no one understands them. He contrasts this with Israel, where a large percentage of the population has served.

00:34:29  PROF. RON AVI ASTOR
In Israel, it's not uncommon for a teacher who might have been an officer, or a bus driver may have served in a combat unit. So the number of adults that are working in schools in the community who understand what war means or what kids may go through is huge.

00:34:46  MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
There are efforts to support military children in public schools happening across the country. A Washington state school pairs students with military mentors for the year, a Virginia school invites service members to talk about their experiences, and in California there are almost 100 school gardens where civilian and military families work together to get to know each other.

00:35:10  MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
But experts say these efforts need to be more intentional and coordinated and scaled up if we want to reach the hundreds of thousands of military children across the U.S. With less than 1 percent of the population serving in the military, there's a cultural divide that needs to be bridged and that isn't just the responsibility of schools.

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]

00:35:36  MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA
Up next, children whose parents have paid the ultimate price.

00:35:40  UNIDENTIFIED CHILD
When my mom took me to the Army, I saw he was dead and I cried on him.

00:35:46  MS. KAVITHA CARDOZA

[SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC]
From WAMU in Washington, D.C. and PRI, Public Radio International, this is "Breaking Ground," a documentary series dedicated to unearthing stories you don't hear elsewhere. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Today we've been talking about our nation's military children. And in this segment, we'll hear from a few of the approximately 5,000 who've lost a parent or older sibling in the past decade.

The organization TAP stands for Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS holds Good Grief Camps around the country, where young people are taught they're not alone in their sadness. I spent some time at a camp in Philadelphia.

[SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN AT CAMP]

This could be any room of five to seven-year-olds, until you look at the pictures they're drawing. Six-year-old Grayson Garber is from New York. His father, Richard, was serving in the Navy when he died in 2011.

Tell me about your picture.

This is my dad watching TV and this is a graveyard.

He's watching TV in the graveyard?

Yeah.

Tell me a little bit about him. I'm never met him.

His name is Richard. He was in the Navy. He got hit by a bomb and also a big missile hit him.

Catherine Clark is sitting next to Grayson, furiously coloring with blue around a winged figure. She's five and a half.

My dad's an angel and he's about to swim in Hawaii.

Have you been to Hawaii with your dad?
Yes. It was hot.

Did he splash you? Yeah?

Yes. He likes to tickle people.

And what would you do?

I would tickle him back.

Catherine's father, Kevin, died in Afghanistan in 2012. Dylan Bayless is eight. He's written his name on a bright yellow star. And right next to it is the name David. That's his stepfather who died in combat in Afghanistan in 2009.

Can you read what you've written?

"Dear David, I miss you so much. I want you to come back, please." I really didn't want him to die. And I said, "Don't go out there because you're going to die," and he didn't listen.

For teenagers, this TAPS camp can be calming, as they deal with loss during an already difficult age. Fourteen-year-old Madison Cheever says this is the only place she can talk about her dad Rob as much as she wants.

You don't have to worry about, "Oh, what if someone makes fun of me."

Just three days after Sgt. 1st Class Robert Cheever returned to the U.S. after his third tour of duty in Afghanistan he had a stroke. When his family was told he wouldn't recover, they moved from an Army base in New York, to Minnesota, where Rob's family lived. His wife, Jill Bailey, says her children's sorrow was compounded by leaving the only home they had ever known.

Even though we had moved back to the Midwest to our family, they're all civilians. It was culture shock.
Rob Cheever died a month later. He was 37. Now, his daughter Madison says she can't relate to other children in school.

They're like, "Oh, yeah, I lost a grandparent." They don't know how it feels to lose someone who would possibly walk you down the aisle someday.

Cheever says she's filled two or three journals with letters she's written to her dad because she's sure he reads them.

Because then I still can remember him and he's not slowly fading away and just being a memory.

She says that when they visit his grave, she sits down and talks to him.

Until my mom final says, "We need to go." She says that I'm definitely his child who's always talking and never stops.

Back in the children's group, Gracen Gaber is waiting for the next activity to start. I ask about the stress ball he's just made out of balloons and Play-Doh. It's meant to help him cope with anger. Gracen, what do you usually do when you get angry at home, before you had your stress ball.

Wrestle my brother.

And now what are you going to do?

I'm going to throw it [unintelligible].

You're going to throw your stress ball at your brother now? I think you're supposed to squeeze it.

I know.

Nice. Vanessa Daley at TAPS listens as children share what they've learned at camp.
Even somebody died in a family, you can still have fun.

You can share your feelings that you never shared with people.

You guys are really, really brave.

Daley herself lost her father 11 years ago when he was deployed in Iraq. She wants these children to know there are two paths they can take.

We can take that grief and you can hold it inside and it can be very negative. I just want the kids to see that there's another road, and that's the road that their parents would want them to take.

Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, approximately 3,000 service members have killed themselves. That doesn't include veterans or National Guard and Reserve troops, not on active duty. The Department of Defense now considers suicide among the most important issues facing the military. For children, suicide is extremely difficult to understand. Because they want their loved one to be a hero, as in, how many people did my dad save? Or, did he jump on a bomb to save his buddies? Many blame themselves and feel responsible.

80 miles away from the TAPS camp in Joppa, Maryland, seven-year-old Connor Diel is sitting in his basement. He's balancing a large photo album on his lap. His mother Susan says he does this several times a month.

This is a picture of me. We have a wagon and my dad used to pull me around in it. This is a unicorn that he used to wear.

Where's that?

Afghanistan. Whoops, we skipped a page.

Daddy is Michael Diel, who served in a Special Tactics Unit for the Air Force. Susan says they were both 23 when they met.
He would say, just tell people we met at a bar. But I say we met at a Christmas party, because it was at a Christmas party at a bar. But we met that night and the rest was history.

He was a dashing and happy airman who jumped out of planes. She was a gorgeous and kind therapist in private practice. They fell in love instantly. During their nine years as a couple, they were apart a lot because of Michael's job. Deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Kuwait, and constant trainings. In 2007, Michael got out of the military and transitioned into civilian life. But it didn't go the way he'd hoped.

He was only offered lower paying positions and he had all this special tactics training, but he didn't have a college degree. He thought his skills would be valued more than reality.

At around the same time, he was diagnosed with ADHD and depression. His doctor prescribed a variety of medications, including one he should not have been taking because of his family history of bipolar disorder.

He started changing then.

What do you mean, changing?

He was very suspicious about everything, made accusations of me that weren't true.

You having affairs.

Yeah. All that stuff. And how do you tell somebody who's paranoid that they're paranoid?

One weekend, Susan and their children went to the beach. Michael stayed behind because of work and insisted he was fine, that they go and have fun.

And I got a call at four, 4:20 in the morning, saying that he was dead.
Michael Diel was 33-years-old. Connor says it's hard sometimes keeping his dad's death a secret. Does your little brother ask you about him?

Yes. He asked how he died, but my mom doesn't want me to tell him and I say, oh, mommy doesn't want me to tell you.

Did your friends ask you in school what happened?

I told my friends that he died, but I didn't tell them how he died, because it was too violent. Do I tell you, like, how he died?

You can if you want.

He died because, like, his brain got messed up and he got mad a lot. And he accident -- when, how he died, he accidentally shot himself.

I see Susan shaking her head, but Connor continues talking. He says when he thinks about his dad, sometimes he's happy, sometimes he's sad. And sometimes he's angry.

What do you feel angry about?

That he's not here and I'm angry because that I can't play with him.

Susan says dealing with questions from Connor was the most difficult. And there were many questions.

But how did he die? And I gritted my teeth, you know, and basically said, he took his own life. But how? And I said, with a gun. And he looked at me and he goes, he shot himself? Why? And I said, I don't know. I kind of explained that he had something wrong with his brain. You know, the fact that he said to you that it was accidental. He knows that it's not. Michael was an excellent marksman. He knew how to handle a weapon. There was nothing accidental about it.

That's just his way of...
Coping, I think. Yeah.

Since Michael died, Connor has begun sucking his thumb again and become more anxious.

Because we went to the beach. In their little minds, everything was fine. And we come home and daddy's gone. That doesn't make any sense to anybody.

Connor is taking me through a closet door that opens into a smaller door and you crawl through it into a tiny little room his father built for him.

This is my four that he made. It's very small.

I don't know whether I can fit in here. Oh my gosh. You flip a switch and little stars come on. There are maps from Afghanistan pinned on the walls and a pint sized cabinet where Connor keeps his prized possessions.

My dad gave some of his stuff that he used to use for work.

What's that?

This is a little pouch. He wrote Diel on it.

Cool. I love how he had written his last name on the pouch and that's your last name, too.

Yeah.

Connor's eyes sparkle with pride as he points out his father's helmet and books and citations.

I've never met your dad, right? And people are going to listen to this and they've never met your dad. So, if you had to explain who your dad was, how would do that?
He's very nice and no matter what, he has time to play with me. He would tell jokes and he would sometimes make funny faces.

He had a whole, I would say 32 and a half really good years. And I don't want him to be remembered for the last moment in his life.

[SOUND BITE OF MUSIC]

I said daddy would be very proud of you. Right?

Yeah. He was an angel.

He is an angel. Right.

As Susan Diel cuddles Connor on the front porch of her house, she tries not to think of the many memories Michael won't be there to make with their sons. She's just got engaged and is trying to make way for future memories with her fiancee. It's a difficult balance.

When we're just driving along and it's a perfectly good day, and you get asked, why isn't daddy still here? It breaks your heart. But, some days, it's a beautiful day out, and you just get to smile and live and be good. So it just depends on the day. Today's a good day.

Our nation's two million military children are bearing a big burden. They've seen their parents head overseas and sometimes get hurt or killed. They've wallowed in silence and sometimes have grieved alone. All of that takes a toll. We see so often that these children are resilient. But I wonder if that's just a way to let ourselves off the hook for what we owe these kids. I started thinking of their sacrifices and the unpredictable nature of their lives. And I realized that even though they didn't sign up, these children have served, too.

Perhaps we should start by saying to them, as well as their parents, thank you for your service. You've been listening to "Breaking Ground: Military Children." Our editors are Tara Boyle and Deborah George. Special thanks to Meymo Lyons, Cavin Munson, Mark McDonald and Carrie Needon. Also to Chris Chester, Carrie Moscow, Kathleen Allenbough and the rest of the digital and marketing team. Also thanks to Noel Gumper and Robin Kayla, along with Liam Sullivan, Julie Alderman, and Andrew Katsmosis.
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