



Early Learning and Child Care Professionals and Practitioners

WORKING WITH

Military and Veteran Families

MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES IN CANADA PROUDLY CONTRIBUTE ON THE HOME FRONT AND ARE THE STRENGTH BEHIND THE UNIFORM.



EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE (ELCC) PROFESSIONALS AND PRACTITIONERS POSITIVELY INFLUENCE EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT AND CAN PLAY A PART IN BUILDING RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN OF MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES.

THE MILITARY COMMUNITY DEFENDS CANADA'S VALUES, INTERESTS AND SOVEREIGNTY AT HOME AND ABROAD.



Canadian Military and
Veteran Families Leadership Circle
Cercle canadien du leadership pour les
familles des militaires et des vétérans



L'Institut Vanier de la famille
VANIER
The Vanier Institute of the Family

A PORTRAIT OF MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES IN CANADA

Canada's military and Veteran families are diverse, resilient and strong, and they are a source of pride for the country.

They engage *with* – and play important roles *in* – their workplaces, communities and society as a whole.

Military family experiences are unique, with frequent moves and work relocations across the country and around the world; recurring parental absences and periods of serial solo parenting; high-stress work environments; and risk of illness, injury or death. These realities can impact not only serving military members, but also their family members, whose schooling, careers and well-being can be affected.

Estimates show there are more than 462,000 infants, toddlers and young children living in military and Veteran families across Canada. They live, learn and grow in the same diverse communities as *all* families – urban, suburban, exurban, rural, remote, isolated and Northern – and access civilian community services and programs, where their unique military lifestyle might not be identified or understood.

Military members may be away when a child is born, making it hard to form infant attachments, as well as challenging for the other parent, who may at times be at home alone for weeks or months. As the military member and their family transition from uniformed service, they bring their health, talents, experience and injuries, if any, into Veteran family life.

Historically, children and youth in military families in Canada lived and attended schools on army bases, air force wings or navy installations. Over the past several decades, families are increasingly living *off* base, military-run schools have been closed, most children access child care in their civilian neighbourhoods and youth attend publicly funded community schools, where community providers and practitioners may not be aware of their unique experiences and life circumstances.

Building awareness and enhancing our understanding of military and Veteran families make it possible to identify strengths, facilitate community integration and foster inclusion.



462,000

More than 462,000
children and youth
are growing up in
military and Veteran
families in Canada.

"If you don't know the
military, then it won't be easy
to understand. It's like learning
a new language."

A MILITARY YOUTH
(THROUGH OUR EYES, 2019)



EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE IN CANADA (0 TO 5 YEARS)

ELCC professionals and practitioners are part of an interconnected global community that is constantly evolving to provide inclusive, rich and dynamic programs and learning environments for all children (aged 0 to 5 years).



Military literacy is the basic knowledge and understanding of military life experiences and of the unique life stressors (such as relocations, absence and risk) that have an impact on family life.

With diverse contributions to the education and well-being of children across Canada, ELCC professionals and practitioners:

- **Optimize children's development** by facilitating their learning, which can have an impact on emotional, social, behavioural and educational growth. Relationships of trust and care are an essential part of the process through which ELCC professionals and practitioners help families develop strategies and coping mechanisms to minimize the stresses and strains resulting from daily life, disruptions and, occasionally, trauma.
- **Deliver child-centred care** that can mitigate family stress, strengthen military and Veteran families, and contribute to building resilience.
- **Take evidence-based approaches** to wellness, mental health, positive social and educational outcomes, and human development, all of which are keys to success for children and youth.
- **Establish and maintain open-ended communication with families**, in which they share observations about child development and peer relationships, discuss concerns and put plans in place.
- **Have a positive influence on early learning and development** and play a part in **building resilience** in the children of military and Veteran families. Sharing observations of children at play affords insights into how children are experiencing the environment and understanding events.

“Thank you for letting us be part of your village. From teaching them kindness and empathy, to discipline and potty training, you have planted seeds that we look forward to continue to help grow. You will be a part of who they will become.”

**A MILITARY FAMILY TO THEIR
CHILD CARE CENTRE**

Establishing strong relationships with parents and their children provides the foundation for understanding and supporting children's healthy development.

When ELCC professionals and practitioners are informed by military literacy, they are better able to support, encourage and enhance the lives of military-connected children and their families. This is especially relevant when a parent is absent on a deployment or living with an injury, or when a family is transitioning from a military to Veteran lifestyle. The supportive, respectful and understanding relationship between the practitioner and the family is a key piece of the child's optimal well-being.

Understanding the unique experiences and lifestyle of military and Veteran families can help ELCC professionals and practitioners and others identify and connect with military and Veteran children, and connect them with others who may have similar circumstances.

Research shows that military and Veteran children communicate the importance of connecting with other children who have shared in the uniqueness of growing up in a military family (see Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2014). Peer connections among military and Veteran children who have shared similar experiences of relocation, long or recurring parental absence, and lost friendships due to relocations can help normalize difficult feelings surrounding these changes that military children often must navigate.

ELCC professionals and practitioners recognize that young children often take their cues from how they observe the reactions of their parents or caregivers. By providing a flexible but secure environment, young children can develop strong adaptation and resiliency skills.



SETTLING INTO A NEW COMMUNITY

Families often experience stress during relocation related to re-establishing relationships, routines and activities in their new communities, such as finding a new family doctor or pediatrician; getting registered into extracurricular sports programs; finding local resources such as libraries, pharmacies or specialized medical or mental health services; applying for new health care documents; and making new friends.

Military families, however, tend to experience this far more often than their civilian counterparts.

Research shows that military families experience frequent moves, with more than one-third (34%) reporting that they had relocated at least four times due to military postings throughout their career. They typically have little say in when or where they will be posted, nor the length of time they will spend at each location. With each move, these families often must establish new community ties and “get in line” to access community resources. Military family members have reported in multiple studies that the most challenging aspects of life to re-establish after relocation are medical services, a social support network and non-military spousal employment. These moves can create many opportunities for enhanced learning, but they may also disrupt relationships, routines, learning and care.

Military children report that social connection is an important protective factor during relocation. A move creates an opportunity for children to develop the social and problem-solving skills necessary to meet new friends and build new social networks.



10,000

Every year in Canada, an estimated 10,000 families are relocated due to postings, 8,000 of whom move to a new province.



Best Practice

For families preparing to relocate and leave a program, ELCC professionals and practitioners can work with the child to develop an All About Me page that they can bring to their next care environment. This exercise helps empower the child, who is given an opportunity to inform others about important things about themselves that they choose to share, such as favourite activities, foods, places they have visited or lived, and so on. This can then be used as a quick reference tool that helps to establish the practitioner–child connection soon after the move.



With this level of mobility among military families, the stress for young members of the family can be real, but most have been found to quickly adapt within six months of relocation.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

ELCC professionals and practitioners are a vital and valuable resource for military and Veteran families adapting to a new child care program.

They can help young children and their families understand, anticipate and respond to common reactions to stressors that occur before, during and after moving to a new community and settling into their new program.

ELCC professionals and practitioners see and respond to direct and indirect changes in behaviour: infant attachment; sleep; disruptive behaviours; developmental delays or setbacks; or relational changes. These can be the result of many influences in the infant, toddler or young child's life; it is important to consider the broader context of human needs and consider whether there are disabilities, special needs or exceptionalities, as these may be part of the military and Veteran family experience.

**"The excitement
our children share
when we pick them up
is heartwarming."**

**A MILITARY FAMILY TO
THEIR CHILD CARE CENTRE**

ELCC professionals and practitioners are a valuable collaborator with the family, communicating openly with parents; providing guidance; and helping children and families anticipate, prepare for, respond and react to, problem solve and resolve issues around, communicate about, relate to and adjust and adapt to their new or changing circumstances.

ELCC professionals and practitioners facilitate adjustment to the new environment by establishing a relationship with the child and family, and by creating opportunities for the child to form relationships with other children in the program.



ADJUSTING TO A LONG ABSENCE AND PREPARING FOR REUNION

Parental absence or geographic separation, especially when parental deployments are volatile, high-risk or in high-profile locations, impacts children in important ways.

Deployment can alter relationships with the departing parent, sometimes with long-term or permanent consequences. Bonding with the deployed parent can be challenging for the child and the parent. When a parent is preparing for a deployment, invite them to visit the program during the day to meet the child's friends, understand their child's routine and spend some additional time with their child.

Deployment of a parent can result in increased acting-out behaviours or emotional concerns with young children, leading to disciplinary problems. Often these children will have no history of problems prior to the parental absence. Some U.S. research indicates that the pre-deployment phase for parents of preschool-aged children is the most stressful period. The anticipation of the separation and lack of information around the leave date, as well as attending to financial and legal matters, often creates tension and anxiety for families.

14%



14% of military families
report experiencing
3 or more deployments;
8% reported 7 or more.

Want to learn more about the deployment cycle and how it affects families?
Please visit <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/mental-health.html>

“[Military] deployments create circumstances of perceived loss and uncertainty around the physical and psychological presence of a family member. It is important for families to recognize the ambiguity around the parental absence and types of losses that the child may experience as an important part of healthy family functioning.”

HELENA HAWRYLUK
(MILITARY FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE
– EDMONTON GARRISON)

Children of Veteran families also are affected by absences caused by deployment or training. Although very young, they may have experienced the military lifestyle and, once their parents have left the military, they may experience the loss of their “military family” (friends in *and* outside the military community). Children may also be living with a parent who is struggling with health challenges.

A parent returning home ill or injured can be extremely difficult on even the most resilient of families. Anxiety related to the parent who has been away can manifest as sleep disturbance, bedwetting and/or behavioural regression. Separation anxiety experienced by young children can lead to acting out, which can increase parenting stress for the remaining caregiver.



BUILDING RESILIENCE AND CONNECTION

Definitions of resilience are varied, and the word itself can have both positive and negative reactions among the military and Veteran family community.

For many military and Veteran families, resilience looks like *an ability to overcome various stressors and move forward with new strategies for dealing with future obstacles successfully*, that is, a willingness to take on the next challenge.

On any given day, most military and Veteran spouses or partners and their children demonstrate a high degree of resilience. The majority report that they have successfully met the challenges associated with military life, are physically and mentally healthy, are satisfied with their marriage and/or relationship, and are very supportive of their military partner's career and service.

There are a number of steps that can be taken to facilitate resilience and connection:

- *Encourage* parents to seek extra help when they need it. Connect parents with other respite resources in the community, including at one of the 32 Military Family Resource Centres across Canada.
- *Connect* with families and their children to celebrate small milestones with them (i.e., a parent arriving home, a newly purchased house, a move into a newly completed bedroom). Some traditional family celebrations (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries) may be difficult for the families if they are far from loved ones.
- *Visit* a nearby base or have a parent come and speak to the children about military life. This can build a sense of pride in the child as well as connect the child to his or her parent's profession.



Most children living in military and Veteran families also tend to be resilient, physically and mentally healthy, and living in caring, supportive homes.

"Everyone has the ability to be resilient... until they're not."

DR. HEIDI CRAMM (QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, CIMVHR)

COMMUNICATING OPENLY

Stressors such as parental absence during deployment and family relocations can create behaviours or challenges that mask or heighten other developmental delays.

Consider all information at hand while observing, screening, discussing with parents and providing referrals for children.

There are a number of steps that can be taken to facilitate communication:

- *Learn* about all factors that may be influencing the development of military-connected children, including the absence of a military parent on training or deployment. There is a fine balance between understanding the military context, overattribution of military factors, and delay in screening and discussing the way forward with parents.
- *Ask* parents to keep child care staff updated with upcoming changes, such as deployments, postings or parental absences, so that staff can watch for any behaviour changes or initiate preventative strategies to make transitions successful. Child care providers may ask parents what their child or children know about their deployment and/or how they talk about it at home. Every family uses different language around concepts such as deployment, relocation or reunion. It can be helpful to use the same language with the child as what is being used at home.
- *Create* programming that allows families to join their children in activities. Families connect in a non-threatening way and it helps children and their families to get to know their caregiver in a more meaningful way (e.g., Family Picnic Day, gingerbread house making, I Love to Read Week, special bake sale days, movie nights).
- *Provide* opportunities for feeling identification. Young children can experience difficulties expressing feelings through words and often express their feelings through play. Such opportunities can help them deal with difficult feelings in an age-appropriate way (e.g., creating a calming space/place, listening to music, drawing/colouring, shaping clay or playdough).
- *Show* extra love, patience and understanding for both military-connected children and their families, all of whom have unique perspectives and experiences.



ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES FOR CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Strongest Families Institute

Strongest Families Institute offers evidence-based, distance programs for military and Veteran families dealing with behaviour and/or anxiety concerns with their children and youth. Phone-based programs are delivered at convenient times, offering support when and where it is needed. The skill-based sessions have been researched and proven effective. Strongest Families has a greater than 85% success rate! All programs are available in English and French.

There is no cost for military families, and services are entirely confidential.

Families can be referred through a local Military Family Resource Centre or by calling 1-866-470-7111.

Military Family Resource Centres

Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs) aim to simplify lives and support families during challenging times. They can be found in communities across Canada and can be an excellent source of information and collaboration. They are military-informed and often offer child care and additional services that are adapted to the military lifestyle, such as casual, emergency and respite care, as well as extended services for military and Veteran families. Find out if an MFRC is located nearby at www.cafconnection.ca.



Organizations and
programs can help.

ADDITIONAL MILITARY FAMILY RESOURCES

24/7 Military Family Information Line 1-800-866-4546

24/7 Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service Line
1-800-268-7708

Canadian Child Care Federation <http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca>

Canadian Institute for Military and Veterans Health Research
<https://cimvhr.ca>

Canadian Military Family Magazine <http://cmfmag.ca>

Children's Education Management
<https://www.cafconnection.ca/National/Programs-Services/Children-s-Education-Management.aspx>

Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health
<http://jmvfh.utpjournals.press>

Kids Help Phone <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

Military Family Resource Centres
<https://www.cafconnection.ca/National/Local-Sites/Military-Family-Resource-Centres.aspx>

Military Family Services https://www.cfmws.com/en/AboutUs/MFS/Pages/mfs_land_page.aspx

Road to Mental Readiness – Family Members
<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/programs/caf-mental-health-services.html#rmrp>

Strongest Families Institute www.strongestfamilies.com

The Vanier Institute of the Family <http://vanierinstitute.ca>

Veterans Affairs Canada <http://www.veterans.gc.ca>

You're Not Alone: Mental Health Resources for CAF Members and Families <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/caf-community-health-services/mental-health-resources.page>

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT REVIEWERS

Dr. Heidi Cramm, Associate Scientist, Strategic Initiatives, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR)

Don Giesbrecht, President and CEO, Canadian Child Care Federation

Helena Hawryluk, PhDc, RSW, Military Family Resource Centre – Edmonton Garrison

Lois Johnson, Director, MFRC Child Care Centre – Winnipeg

Laurie Landy, Professor ECE (ret'd), Seneca College

Julie Leblanc, Senior Manager, Corporate Communications and Stakeholder Relations, Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services

Cynthia LeBreton, Childcare Manager, Military Family Resource Centre – National Capital Region

Lauren Lysack, Projects and Special Events, The Vanier Institute of the Family

Col (ret'd) Russell Mann, MBA, Senior Advisor, The Vanier Institute of the Family

Robin McMillan, Senior Consultant, Canadian Child Care Federation

Roza Parlin, Executive Director, Military Family Resource Centre – Edmonton Garrison

Sherri Pierce, Social Worker, MFRC Child Care Centre – Winnipeg

Jerris Popik, BA, Mental Health and Wellness Team Lead, Military Family Resource Centre – Edmonton Garrison

Dr. Patricia Lingley-Pottie, President and CEO, Strongest Families Institute

Amelia Rezny, Program Coordinator, Birth to 18 Years, Military Family Resource Centre – National Capital Region

Courtney Ritsema, Children's Program Coordinator, MFRC Child Care Centre – Winnipeg

Nora Spinks, CEO, The Vanier Institute of the Family

Todd Stride, Senior Manager, Community Development, Military Family Services

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ORGANIZATIONS

The Canadian Child Care Federation

The Canadian Child Care Federation is committed to best practice in early childhood education. Our organization is about the value of children.

We value children.

In order to protect and enhance our children, to promote their safety and their healthy growth and development, we are committed to providing Canadians with the very best in early learning and child care knowledge and best practices.

Our tools are research and knowledge dissemination, and the creation and nurturing of active networks.

The Vanier Institute of the Family

The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada.

For more than 50 years, the Vanier Institute has offered access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of families, family life and family experiences, expectations and aspirations in Canada.

Veterans Affairs Canada

Veterans Affairs Canada's mandate is to support the well-being of Veterans and their families, and to promote recognition and remembrance of the achievements and sacrifices of those who served Canada in times of war, military conflict and peace.

Veterans Affairs Canada fulfills its mandate and role through the delivery of programs such as disability benefits, financial benefits, rehabilitation, pension advocacy, education and training supports. The Department also works to commemorate the achievements and sacrifices of Canadians during periods of war, military conflict and peace.

Veterans Affairs Canada serves a highly diverse group that reflects the remarkable breadth of Canada's contributions to world peace.



Canadian Military and
Veteran Families Leadership Circle
Cercle canadien du leadership pour les
familles des militaires et des vétérans

THE CANADIAN MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

The Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle includes leaders from businesses and community, Department of National Defence, Veterans Affairs Canada, Military Family Services, Military Family Resource Centres and military and Veteran families. Members have an interest in the partner-based Leadership Circle to share information, mobilize knowledge, foster relationships and form collaborations. The ***Working with Military and Veteran Families*** series equips professionals and informs communities so they can equitably serve military members, Veterans and their families. Each publication in the series is customized to various professionals and practitioners in the community.

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Canadian Child Care Federation

Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services/Military Family Services

Canadian Institute for Military and Veterans Health Research

Military Family Resource Centre – Edmonton Garrison

Military Family Resource Centre – National Capital Region

MFRC Child Care Centre – Winnipeg

The Vanier Institute of the Family

Veterans Affairs Canada

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Also in the *Working with Military and Veteran Families* series:

