Will You Come Home?  
Using Literature to Meet the Needs of Military-Connected Students

Military-connected students face unique challenges and stressors like frequent moving, deployment or re-deployment of a loved-one, loss of a loved-one, anxiety, the injury or disability of a loved-one, and feelings of ambiguous loss (Risberg, 2013; Sherbert, 2011). According to the Military Child Education Coalition (2012), there are military-connected students in every school district in the U.S., presenting teachers with the challenge of meeting their social and emotional needs. This quote from a public school teacher illustrates the need for educators to be aware of, and have solutions to meet the needs of military-connected students: “It used to be a big thing when a student had a parent deployed and everybody knew about it right away. Now it’s common enough...sometimes we don’t even know... And I think that means they don’t always get the extra care and things that they need to be successful” (Military Child Education Coalition, 2012). We suggest the use of high-quality children’s literature by classroom teachers to help military-connected students identify with characters facing the same problems they face and to help them cope with crisis and develop resiliency.

Using Literature to Make Connections and Gain Insight: Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is defined as the use of literature to teach about the issues that one personally faces through identifying with a character in the book (Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005) and to help children cope with difficult issues and challenges (Ableser, 2008). Bibliotherapy is based in the psychotherapy principles of identification, catharsis, and insight (Iaquinta & Hipsky, 2006). The first principle, identification, happens when the reader relates to a character or situation in the book. The second principle, catharsis, is the emotional release that occurs when the reader revisits feelings that were repressed. The final principle, insight, happens when the reader gains new insights and is motivated to make positive behavioral changes. Often, military-connected children are seeking connections to others who are in similar life situations and they feel more at ease when they learn that they are not the only ones experiencing this particular circumstance (Lowe, 2009). This article offers educators elementary, middle, and secondary level literature recommendations to use in classrooms with military-connected students experiencing six of the unique challenges or stressors common to this demographic as a form of bibliotherapy. While a military child attending public school may feel a lack of connection with others in a similar situation, the following book list offers educators tools to help the student identify with a character facing the same challenges, acknowledge and release their emotions, and perhaps gain new insight in order to better cope with the demands of school and learning in the face of adversity.

Connecting to KCCRS

Teachers can refer to the Kansas College and Career Ready (KCCR) English Language Arts Anchor Standards for All Grades to relate any of the following books to classroom English and language arts activities. For each of the reviewed titles that follow, it is suggested that teachers can create objectives based on KCCR Literacy Learning Anchor Standard 1 - Engage in literacy learning through a collaborative and community effort and in an integrated fashion, rather than as discrete skills in isolation. Activities appropriate for this standard include literature response activities like thought journals, open-mind portraits, and grand conversations that situate the books within the context of the needs of military-connected students. Standard 11 under the KCCR Anchor Standards for Reading - Encounter a diverse range of engaging and culturally sensitive text and media that motivate the desire to be literate, also provides
a curricular foundation for using the suggested titles in K-12 classrooms. Teachers can encourage students to respond to the literature through art, writing, or oral activities and to compare the lives of characters to their own or others they know.

The books reviewed below can also be used by classroom teachers to facilitate discussion and literacy learning among their students by focusing on classroom dialogues employing comprehension and collaboration through KCCCR Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening 1 - Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. Teachers could form a book club for military-connected students and their peers, allowing them to read and discuss the literature while deepening understanding and practicing comprehension strategies. Another application of using the reviewed books to meet the state standards is through KCCCR Anchor Standards for Writing 3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. For example, after a class read aloud of the book, Sunday Chutney, students can write narratives detailing their own experience of having a new student come to school or being a new student in a classroom.

The following are descriptions of the difficult challenges military-connected students in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms may face and suggested primary grade and middle grade or young adult titles that depict characters who are encountering a similar form of those difficult challenges. Whether read aloud to students or shared with them for independent or family reading, these beautifully written books offer students the opportunity to consider their own experiences and identify with characters as they cope with similar challenges.

Frequent Moving

The Military Child Education Coalition (2012) states that military-connected children are three times more likely to move frequently than civilian students, and may change schools as many as six to nine times before graduating. Changing schools may have both positive and negative effects. For some children, this experience may cause them to miss days of school because of a move or because of problems adjusting to a new school. The stressors of establishing new peer relationships, increased academic demands, and possible conflict in parent/child relationships can negatively affect children’s adjustment to a new school environment. The situation can also be compounded by challenges unique to frequent school transitions, such as slow transfer of school records and differences in curricula in new schools or districts (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Some children experience feelings of sadness, depression, or anger at having to leave behind friends and familiar settings. For some children, however, a new school may offer them a chance for a fresh start (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012). The opportunity to make new friends and establish new identities can, for some students, be a welcome challenge. In one sense, military life can offer opportunities to develop resilience, as children may build self-confidence by taking on new responsibilities and embracing new adventures (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013). The following books address both the potential positive and negative effects of relocation.

Primary Grades Review: Sunday Chutney

Finalist for the Australian Book Design Award, Sunday Chutney is the story of a frizzy-haired, thick-glasses wearing, imaginative little girl named Sunday. The Chutney family moves to new places around the world regularly, resulting in her always being the “new kid in school.” Although her greatest wish is to always have the same home, she stays positive about her life by way of her vivid and whimsical imagination. Author-illustrator Aaron Blabley infuses humor into this serious subject, creating an endearing and strong character who finds the constant relocating upsetting, but copes by finding the good in the bad situations like the first lunchtime in a new school. This book is useful any time a new student arrives in the classroom, both to help new students to see they are not alone, and to help the class to empathize with how it feels to move frequently.

Middle Grade Review: Operation Yes

Author Sara Lewis Holmes is married to an Air Force pilot and has lived in eleven states and three countries. Her novel, Operation Yes, is a funny, touching novel drawn from the life of her military family. The book begins on the first day of school for Bo and his classmates in a sixth-grade classroom in a school near an Air Force base in North Carolina. New teacher Miss Loupe has begun the day rather unconventionally by tapping a rectangle onto the floor, inviting them to improvisation theatre, and encouraging them to see what happens when they say “yes.” Meanwhile, Bo’s cousin, Gari, prepares to move from Seattle to North Carolina as Gari’s mother, an army nurse, is being deployed to Iraq. Gari had been accepted into an elite private school, the Seattle Junior Academy, and leaving
behind her friends and her plans was more than she could fathom. Once she arrived in North Carolina, she has to adjust to living with her relatives, finding her way around a new school, making new friends, and other challenges, not the least of which is a three-hour time difference. As Bo, Gari, and their classmates journey through the year, Miss Loupe’s unusual approach to teaching causes them to consider issues from a new perspective. When Miss Loupe’s brother, who was serving in Afghanistan, goes missing, the entire class finds itself improvising to find a way to cope with this “great battle” and to help their teacher whom they have come to love and respect.

Deployment or Re-Deployment of a Loved-One

“Deployments can have many effects on children, some stemming from separation anxiety, stress of worry for the deployed parent’s safety and a change in resources or parental involvement in their activities” (Risberg, 2013, p. 17).

According to the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), approximately two million children have experienced the military deployment of a parent (The School Superintendents Association, 2015). Additionally, roughly 500,000 children, or more than a third of all children with a parent in the military, were born into military families since the beginning of the extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. For these children, it has always been the norm that a parent will at some point be deployed (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012, p. 39). A child’s response to deployment is unique to each child and each family. As military-connected students cope with the cycle of deployment (pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment), each phase of the cycle has its own potential stressors for children and they may struggle with changing roles, relocation, and financial stress. These stressors can be especially pronounced for children experiencing the first time deployment of a family member (Crow & Seybold, 2013). Other children may be facing the reality of multiple or extended deployments that can require them to move through the cycle of deployment and its accompanying challenges again and again. (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012). Often, the moves occur during the school year and may happen more than once in the same school year. The following texts introduce characters who are experiencing stressors associated with the deployment of a parent.

Primary Grades Review: Sometimes We Were Brave

As Jerome’s Navy sailor mother prepares to ship out, she tells him “to be brave.” Along with his dog Duffy, Jerome experiences good days like when Dad takes him for ice cream, and bad days like when he wets the bed as he worries and copes with his mother’s absence. He does not feel brave because he is often afraid. After he brings Duffy to school for a pet show and Duffy faces his fears of being in a new place, his teacher explains to Jerome that bravery is “doing what you’re supposed to even though you’re afraid.” Upon his mother’s return, he is so happy to share his bravery with her as he lived up to her expectations. Winner of the Paterson Prize for Books for Young People 2011, this beautifully illustrated and believable story will appeal to grades K-2 as a read aloud. Children who have experienced the absence of a parent will relate to Jerome’s inner struggle to live up to his Mom’s wishes while still feeling her loss and missing her in his daily life.

Middle Grade Review: Wild Life

Twelve-year-old Erik is excited to pass his hunter’s safety course and is looking forward to his first-ever hunting trip. When he bursts into the living room to share the good news with his mom and dad, he finds them sitting in a darkened living room. Their strained congratulations are followed by the delivery of life-altering news: both of his parents, Army Reserve staff sergeants, are being deployed to Iraq. As Erik’s disbelief turns to dismay, he struggles with fear for his parents’ safety and intense disappointment at the disruption of his plans for the big hunting trip. The deployment of both of his parents necessitates his moving from New York to North Dakota to stay with his maternal grandparents whom he barely knows. Upon arrival there, he is warmly greeted by his grandmother and coldly acknowledged by his grandfather. After he finds and rescues a dog, Erik discovers some old hunting equipment that belonged to his uncle who died in Vietnam. When faced with the news that he must return the dog to its owner, he decides to leave and take the dog with him. This story of survival and adventure addresses many issues common to young people and their families, issues that are compounded during the experience of deployment.

Loss of a Loved-One

A sad fact of military life is the possibility of the death of a parent or family member during wartime deployment. When this most traumatic event occurs, it is critical that classroom teachers be prepared to respond with caring and support. Often, when a death occurs, it is difficult to know how to respond without buying the wrong thing or triggering an emotional reaction. However, not addressing the loss is unrealistic and could hinder how the child adapts within the school setting. It is also important to note that a death in the family of a student affects not only that student but also the entire class (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty,
2012; Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005). Establishing a supportive environment for the student who has suffered the loss as well as that student’s classmates is critical to the grieving process (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005). Offering students stories in which characters are coping with similar tragedies, whether or not they are connected to the deployment to a war zone or to other circumstances on the home front, may help them feel less alone in their journey through grief. The following two texts offer stories of children coping with the fear of potential loss as well as the actual loss of a loved one.

**Primary Grades Review: My Father’s Arms Are A Boat**

Told with few words, this book translated to English from the original award winner in Norwegian, tells the sad, but reassuring, story of a young boy after the loss of his mother. One cold winter night, he crawls into his father’s lap by the fireplace and asks questions concerning the things he worries about. His father answers honestly and openly as they go outside and wish upon a star, but the reality is that his mother will never waken and the grief is painfully profound. Amidst the sorrow, the boy finds comfort in his father’s arms and reassurance that “everything will be alright.” Through detailed and soothing wood-cut illustrations young children are introduced to the concept of death as a part of the natural order of life and will be left with a sense of serenity.

**Middle Grade Review: Heart of a Shepherd**

Eleven-year-old Brother (real name Ignatius) is the youngest of five brothers in a military family. He has promised to take care of the family’s ranch while his father is deployed in Iraq. His mother left years ago to pursue an artist’s life and his older brothers are off to school or military training. Brother looks to his grandparents for guidance but struggles with feelings of anger and loneliness as he perseveres to fulfill his promise. Many realities of having a parent deployed are depicted in this story, but also prominently detailed are the realities of life on a modern-day Oregon ranch. As Brother experiences a series of “firsts”—stitching up his brother’s head, assisting the birth of a calf, and surviving a wildfire - his relationships with his grandfather and others lead him to what he believes is his life’s calling to become a military chaplain. When an unexpected loss grips his family, Brother must cope with his own grief and guilt, an uncertain future, and the unimagined kindness of people he’d soon meet.

**Anxiety**

“Students frequently experience anxiety of the unknown and not knowing how their parent is, and preoccupation with their thoughts and an inability to concentrate on course work.” – Kaylee Myers, KSU Instructor and Teacher In Residence with 18 years primary classroom experience.

Anxiety and the accompanying chronic worry can create obstacles to the student’s learning, the learning of others, and the effectiveness of teachers (Minihan & Schultz, 2014). Intense worry about the safety of a loved one and the day-to-day coping of those left at home can lead to the depletion of a military-connected student’s psychological energy and cognitive function (Cozza & Lerner, 2015). Students may experience differing levels of anxiety depending upon which phase of the deployment cycle the family is currently experiencing (Heubner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Older children and adolescents may experience greater levels of anxiety than younger children because of their increased awareness of the effect of military conflict and world events (Oates, 2002). Acknowledging the student’s concerns and giving him or her opportunities to express anxiety through writing, speaking, and reading can aid in processing these feelings (Sherbert, 2011). By sharing texts such as the following, educators can introduce military connected students to characters who are also experiencing similar anxieties.

**Primary Grades Review: Whimsy’s Heavy Things**

“Whimsy’s heavy things were weighing her down. She knew she needed to do something, but she wasn’t sure what” (p. 6).

With gorgeous yet stark gray landscape backgrounds, we watch as a sad-eyed little girl, Whimsy, tries to cope with the weighty burden of her heavy things. A metaphor for the stresses and anxieties she faces, Whimsy pulls a wagon filled with charcoal-colored, cannon ball like objects she just can not get rid of. Written in simple language, she tries many ways to make her heavy thing go away like sweeping them under the rug only to trip over them. Eventually, Whimsy realizes she can break her heavy things up into smaller pieces that can actually become useful, like marbles to give as a gift to a friend or steps to see over the tallest wall. By breaking up the heavy things, they become lighter and easier to deal with showing readers that heavy things like fears and worries can be transformed and thus lessened. Teachers can share this character with students who need to lighten their own loads by first acknowledging their worries and then by finding ways to make them more manageable.
Middle Grade/Young Adult Review: 
*Operation: Homefront*
Rosalys Herrick is a kindergarten teacher, sweet and beloved by her students and colleagues. She is a wife and a mother to sophomore Laura, freshman Langan, and their younger brother Nicholas. She is also a woman who joined the National Guard to pay for her college tuition. On November 16, 1990, we come to know the thoughts and feeling of each of the Herrick children as one at a time they are delivered the news that their mother’s unit has been called up and that they barely have time to say goodbye. As the family copes with the immense changes in their everyday routines, they also struggle with complicated feelings and emotions. The combination of pride in their mother, resentment of increased responsibilities at home, and fear that something may happen to this person they dearly love causes each member experience vacillating levels of anxiety. This book provides historical information about Operation Desert Shield and the ensuing deployments that occurred prior to today’s current conflicts. Military-connected students whose deployed family members are in the National Guard or Reserves will especially relate to the suddenness of separation and the anxiety caused by being thrust into unfamiliar circumstances.

Injury or Disability of a Loved-One

“Children have said goodbye with the pervasive worry that their mother or father might return injured, or might not return at all” (Lester & Flake, 2013, 122).

Unfortunately, for some military-connected students, the possibility of harm coming to their deployed loved one becomes a reality. Thousands of children have experienced having a parent wounded in action. Some debilitating physical injuries can result in longer separation of the child from the loved one while rehabilitation and healing take place. Other less obvious injuries such as traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may allow the parent and child to be reunited, but the symptoms may cause the parent to be greatly changed from the way he or she was before (Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012). The child may have to assume new roles and responsibilities during the loved one’s recovery or even permanently of the injury is long term. At this point feelings of resentment and guilt as well as grief may require specific coping strategies on the part of all family members (Huebner, et al, 2007). Any injury can be upsetting for children and providing literature such as the following that discusses the effects of injuries can help students to process the changes in their loved one and in their families.

Primary Grades Review: *Why Are You So Scared?: A Child’s Book About Parents With PTSD*
This much needed book for young children addresses post traumatic stress disorder by first defining it and identifying the many causes like military service, assault, bombings, terrorist attacks, or accidents. The explanation addresses the possible behaviors of adults suffering from the PTSD including sleeplessness, severe anxiety and depression, aggression and agitation, and panic attacks and scary dreams. Often, parents with PTSD have experienced physical trauma too, resulting in not only emotional injury, but also bodily injuries leaving them permanently disabled. Using language easily understood by young children, this book encourages kids to focus on being a kid, playing with friends, and emphasizes that it is alright to be happy even though a parent is feeling bad.

Young Adult Review: *Bull Rider*
Cam O’Mara was born into a family of bull-riding champions. His Grandpa Roy, his dad, and his big brother Ben live for the extreme. So does Cam, only his extreme is on a skateboard instead of on the back of a bull. Skateboarding is his passion, his everything, until Ben, a Marine, comes home from Iraq paralyzed from a brain injury. Nothing is as it once was and Ben’s depression and pain are felt by each member of the family. Cam struggles with feeling powerless to help his brother and family cope with this new reality. And then he rides a bull. After that ride, he can’t seem to get bull riding out of his system. Driven by Ben’s pain, Cam is now determined to ride a bull named Ugly, to stay on for the required eight seconds, and to win the $15,000 prize. In order to succeed, he must fake his identity and lie to his family. But, if he can stay on that bull, maybe, just maybe, he can bring inspiration and hope to his big brother once again.

Ambiguous Loss
As military-connected students cope with the challenges of military life, they often experience uncertainty and ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is defined as a loss that is vague, unclear, and indeterminate (Boss, 2007; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). For military families, “the only certainty about the deployment of a service member during war in an era of terrorism is uncertainty from beginning to end” (Huebner, et al, 2007, p. 113). Military-connected students may start to experience ambiguous loss the moment they learn their family member will be deployed. During the pre-deployment phase, though the loved one is still residing with the
family, many aspects of preparing for the deployment may cause the parent to be away from home for many hours each day, and he or she may be distracted or on edge as all of the preparations are made. In a sense, though the service member is still “home,” he or she has already begun to leave (Sherbert, 2011). During the actual deployment when the service member is separated from the family, knowing that he or she is in harm’s way but not knowing how close to danger he or she is can lead to distress and trauma for families (Boss, 2007; Oates, 2002; Pitman & Bowen, 1994). Once the deployed service member has returned home and the family is reunited, though it may be a time for celebration and readjustment, some military-connected students may still experience ambiguous loss if the returning family member does not act or appear the same as before deployment due to physical or emotional trauma he or she experienced while deployed. These changes in their loved one may cause military-connected students to experience yet another sense of loss (Huebner, et al, 2007).

Primary Grades Review:
Knock Knock: My Dad’s Dream For Me
“Knock, Knock,” is the rap on the door of a little boy by a loving father each morning. The little boy pretends to be asleep until his father comes in, and then he leaps into his father’s open arms, but one morning he waits and waits for the familiar knock that never comes. Although readers never find out why his father never returns, the boy suffers the experience of deep permanent loss of a loved one. In the midst of his sorrow, he gets a letter full of advice and encouragement to lead a happy life from his father, and we watch the boy grow up through time until he has his own family and becomes a loving father of his own children. The book’s theme shows readers that the trauma and sadness of loss can eventually be lessened by focusing on the positive and keeping the memory of loved-ones alive by remembering the dreams they had for us. Teachers can use this 2014 Coretta Scott King Book Award winner to open a dialogue about loss with young children, whether because of death, divorce, desertion, incarceration, or deployment.

Young Adult Review: The Impossible Knife of Memory
Eighteen-year-old Hayley Kincain and her father, Andy, have returned to her father’s home town to live in her deceased grandmother’s house and attempt a “normal” life. Andy, a veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, suffers from PTSD. The past few years they have been living on the road, Andy driving a truck and homeschooling Hayley as he tried to escape memories that torment him. Hayley now finds herself in an unfamiliar situation, enrolled in high school and living in a town where townsfolk remember her father from a previous lifetime. Throughout the story, Hayley struggles to help her father battle his demons and addictions. As she copes with ambiguous loss - living with a parent who is often there but not “there” - she gradually comes to accept her father for who he was and who he is. While fearing daily that he may withdraw, leave, or something worse, she also comes to trust new friends and allow others to help. Readers of The Impossible Knife of Memory come to know Hayley as she experiences many stressors common to adolescents (establishing identity, developing relationships, navigating a new school, peer pressure) and simultaneously experiences the uncertainties associated with her father’s condition.

Conclusion
Using literature as a means to facilitate conversations, build classroom community, and to acknowledge students’ emotional and psychological needs allows teachers to meet the unique needs of military-connected students. Each of the books can be used to help children meet the KCCCR English Language Arts Standards through opportunities to respond to text through writing and discussion. The reviewed titles are but a few of the hundreds of books that offer characters facing the same stressors and dilemmas as those experienced by children of the military. By identifying with the characters, military-connected students may see they are not alone and class members may come to better understand, and even help, their peers. These books offer teachers a valuable avenue for opening dialogues and supporting student learning by way of bibliotherapy as they seek to meet the needs of diverse learners in standards-based classrooms.

References


**Primary Grade Titles**


Brisson, P. (2010). *Sometimes we were brave.* Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press.


**Middle Grade/Young Adult Titles**


©Lori Levin, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Kansas State University working with elementary teacher candidates in Primary Literacy methods course work and practicum. Her research interests include struggling beginning literacy learners, utilizing children’s literature in teacher education, and family literacy.

Vicki Sherbert, Ph.d., is an assistant professor at Kansas State University. She currently works with teacher candidates in the area of Secondary and Middle School English Language Arts, Journalism, and Speech/Theatre. Her research interests include teacher education in language arts, adolescent literacy, family literacy, and literacy experiences in military families.

Kaylee Myers is a Kansas State University instructor and Teacher In Residence with 18 years primary classroom experience.