



What You Need to Know About Hidden Helpers



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- There are approximately 2.3 million children under the age 18 living with a disabled veteran in communities across the U.S.
- Military and veteran families experiencing high levels of disruption because of the veteran's and service member's illness, or injury are more likely to report high levels of child distress.
- Hidden Helpers are more likely to experience isolation and have fewer opportunities to interact with peers; have difficulties expressing emotion and learning in school; experience health problems such as stress, burnout, and fatigue.
- Some Hidden Helpers may develop an increased sense of personal strength and self-efficacy, as they are taking on more responsibilities at home.
- Not all injuries incurred in military service are visible. Invisible injuries like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury also require attention and management by family members. A responsibility unseen and often unacknowledged by individuals unfamiliar with these injuries.
- It is important to recognize the stigma around help seeking, especially amongst military and veteran families for whom self-sufficiency is a prized attribute.

Who are Hidden Helpers?

Hidden Helpers are the children and youth who live in homes with wounded, injured, or ill service members and veterans. Based on census data analysis, we estimate there are approximately 2.3 million Hidden Helpers who everyday provide an unseen, unrecognized, and unsupported national service. Often these individuals are taking on monumental responsibilities within the family unit whether assisting a warrior in performing Activities of Daily Living, taking care of other children in the household, or helping to manage finances. As part of our efforts to support and celebrate military and veteran families, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Wounded Warrior Project's Hidden Helpers initiative seeks to uplift the voices of military caregiver kids, better understand the unique challenges they face, and enhance the support services available to them.



Quick Tips for Educators, Guidance Counselors, and School Administrators

ASK: Not every child or parent will disclose their family's military service or veteran's illness or injury. Asking about military service invites further conversation and helps parents and students feel recognized and included.

UNDERSTAND: With less than one percent of eligible Americans connected to military service, there are fewer people truly familiar with the challenges and opportunities of military service. Many veterans and their family members are often eager to share their experience.

CREATE AND SUSTAIN A SAFE SPACE: Create spaces for military kids and Hidden Helpers to connect with one and other. Peer-to-peer support can be great ways for Hidden Helpers to feel connected and understood. Talk to your school's leadership team to better understand how many military and veteran children your school is currently serving. And create ways and safe spaces for them to engage with each other.

TALK: Hidden Helpers often avoid seeking out support or deprioritize their own needs because of their needs of their care recipient at home. Talk to Hidden Helpers who may be struggling about what might be going on at home and connect with your school's guidance or mental health counselors. Invite family members into the classroom to share their experiences of military and post-military life.

CONSIDER: Not all injuries suffered by service members are physical. For veterans of America's post 9/11 conflicts, many more veterans are suffering from the invisible wounds of war like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury. These injuries require a different type of attention by family members, which can be emotionally taxing and distressful. As teachers, remember that while a parent may not have a visible injury, they may still be dealing with a TBI or PTSD and need additional supports. If someone is having a PTSD-induced reaction or trigger, take steps to consider the physical environment and address any elements to help reduce the stress reaction by eliminating triggers.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Explore how to make reasonable accommodations to address the unique home life of the Hidden Helpers. Older students may be providing afterschool care and need to be home at a certain time. Younger students might be accompanying their family on healthcare visits and need time away from school.

Connect with EDF

Need help getting started? The Elizabeth Dole Foundation team is here to help! Please reach out to us at HiddenHelpers@elizabethdolefoundation.org with any questions!



Hidden Helpers in the Classroom

You likely have or will have a Hidden Helper in your classroom or in your school. For Hidden Helpers, the school day can offer respite from daily caregiving duties, as they play and learn with their peers. For some, the stressors of caregiving may result in distracted or unfocused performance during the school day. As a teacher, counselor, or school administrator, you can help these students thrive in the classroom and at home. We are mindful that identifying Hidden Helpers requires going the extra mile. While guidance from the U.S. Department of Education under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has established the "military-student identifier" provision, for states to identify students living in active-duty households, no mechanism has been established to track the test scores, attendance, and graduation rates of students living in households with a wounded, ill, or injured veteran. Consider adopting a veteran-student identifier in your school to track trends among this subset of the military-student..

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