

# Involuntary Sacrifice:

## How Military Parents Build Resilient Children



LCPL MACKENZIE GIBSON, USMC

**Joseph, 9, and Curtis, 4, run into the arms of Sgt Joseph Guidry during a VMA-233 homecoming event at MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., April 29, 2016. Military children often experience long periods of separation from their parents during deployments.**

By Maj Olaolu Ogunyemi, USMC

**V**oluntary military service is an honorable act of bravery and sacrifice. At some point, we all walked into a recruiter’s office, heard arguably the best sales pitch known to man, eagerly relinquished our way of life and swore an oath to protect the Constitution of the United States. If you’re anything like me, you walked into that office with a Hollywood-esque vision of what military service would be. Even so, “Major Payne” and “Full Metal Jacket” didn’t really portray the subgroup that is often overlooked in discussions about selfless sacrifice—military children. Without choice, this group of young people is fulfilling an obligation on behalf of their country. This involuntary service comes with its own set of unique challenges that are worth exploring.

Through these challenges, these young men and women build resilience and develop a continual growth mindset. This development, however, is not automatic. It is created over time by an amalgam of

parents, teachers, mentors and caregivers. This community of leaders creates an environment in which military children develop attributes that will help them overcome their unique hardships and succeed in their future endeavors.

### The Challenges

Creating an environment for growth begins with understanding the unique situation that military children are in. Though the list below may not be all-inclusive, these challenges are shared among thousands of military children and can serve as a jumping-off point from which their community of leaders can develop their own leadership strategies.

**1. Frequent Moves.** Every PCS and PCA requires military families to relocate. For example, my family and I have moved seven times over the past 12 years. Like many others, my children roll with the punches, welcoming each move as an opportunity to meet new people. Nevertheless, I’ve noticed that

the disruption in friendships, academic progress and routines every two to three years has started to weigh on them as they get older. In many of our children’s minds, our moves are perfectly timed—“just when [they] were starting to make friends.” This often creates feelings of instability and adjustment difficulties.

**2. Parental Absence.** Deployments and extended periods of separation from one or both parents can be emotionally taxing for children. Try explaining that you’ll be gone for six to nine months to a child who doesn’t quite grasp the concept of time—it doesn’t go over too well. This leads to feelings of loneliness, anxiety and sadness. As children grow up, they begin to understand the nature of your job and may experience stress over your safety.

**3. School Transitions.** With every move comes a new school. That means our children get a new curriculum, new teachers and administration, and, of course, new friends. To exacerbate this problem, imagine the children who are participating in extracurricular activities. They don’t always have the opportunity to build camaraderie and gel with their teammates. Furthermore, not all programs are created equal. Meaning, moves are a potential setback for our children’s social, athletic and academic progress.

**4. Parental Reintegration.** Reintegration is the most exciting time—at least for the first 24 to 72 hours. Then you start to reinsert yourself into the family routine and resume your role in the home. Most servicemembers would agree that this adjustment period is challenging, to say the least, as our children readjust to the family dynamic.

**5. Extended Family and Hometown Connections.** Even with today’s technology, extended family members and friends of the family sometimes seem so

far away. The occasional visit may actually make your children feel disconnected, especially if they have cousins who live closer to their extended family. The fear of missing out and longing for that close proximity can impact their sense of belonging and feeling of social support.

**6. Cultural Adjustment.** Every move presents a new opportunity to learn about different cultures, climates and customs. Though this is exciting for many, the shock factor associated with constantly having to acclimate to unfamiliar environments can be overwhelming for our children.

**7. Loss and Grief.** This is a tough topic to broach; however, it is a reality. The truth is, we serve alongside heroes—some who pay the ultimate sacrifice. That means that children, young and old, are learning to cope with loss or grief related to family separations, relocations or the unfortunate death of a parent or loved one.

Addressing these challenges requires all of us to come together to provide these children the support, resources and coping strategies that build resilience for each child's unique experience.

### The Environment

These unique challenges reveal opportunities for us to create teachable and memorable moments—to provide lifelong guidance and enduring advice. As such, we must develop and maintain habits that support our children's growth. It's easy to assume that the irregular life

pattern associated with the military precludes military families from establishing habitual behavior. Contrarily, establishing supportive routines is both possible and imperative to ensuring military children are able to thrive in spite of the challenges they face.

That routine begins with encouraging a love for learning by expanding learning opportunities beyond the schoolhouse. Military children are uniquely qualified to have a broadened perspective because they are exposed to different environments. Use this to your advantage to stimulate their intuitive perception or "gut feeling." This plays a crucial role in building resilience by providing our children a deeper sense of self-awareness and guiding them to make adaptive decisions in the face of adversity.

Some argue that our children don't face enough adversity to build or test this intuition. If we're honest, many of us feel like we've endured a little more hardship than the next generation, and our greatest fear is that the lack of hardship is making our children less resilient, or "softer." Using that logic, shouldn't we all be looking for situations in which our children can build resilience and "grit?"

The good news is we can borrow techniques from our military training. We can motivate children to think through problems and push through discomfort by creating in-home situational exercises, or "tactical decision games." That said, don't be too rigid, or you'll zap the fun out of it—you're not the real-life Major



CPL EUGENIO MONTANEZ, USMC

**LCpl Gorge Rodriguez, an intelligence specialist with 2nd Bn, 4th Marines, holds his son William for the first time after returning from a seven-month deployment to Helmand Province, Afghanistan.**

Payne. These exercises can be as simple as having them visualize themselves in a movie and asking them, "What would you have done differently?" Or, you can create experiences.

For example, I handed my son a large, empty box and told him to recycle it. He intuitively knew that the large box would not fit into the recycle bin, so he began planning a way to crush the box. I



LCPL CODY LEMONS, USMC

**A group of friends and family hold up signs while waiting patiently for the arrival of their loved ones aboard MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., on Jan. 16, 2017.**



COURTESY OF MAJ OLAOLU OGUNYEMI, USMC

**Author Maj Olaolu Ogunyemi with his wife and their three children.**

watched my son and his friend feverishly punch and kick the box across the yard before they gave up and asked for help. Some parents would immediately rush outside to save the day. Not so fast! I simply asked him, “What are different ways you can crush a box?” He responded and went back to work outside. About 30 minutes later, the entire box was crushed and in the recycle bin. We finished the “training” with a high-five, connecting physical praise with the emotional high of accomplishment. This simple exercise will whet his appetite and make him eager to solve more problems in the future. We should increase the complexity of these problems as time progresses.

Creating these opportunities requires you to be a supportive guide while providing a balance of autonomy—which cannot be overstated. This is your chance to allow your children to learn through structured lessons and real-world experiences. That’s the nucleus of building resilience by using your child’s unique experiences. Consistently searching for and providing these opportunities for our children to grow is key, but it takes time.

If you just thought, “But I don’t have the time!” Trust me, I understand. Nevertheless, the aphorism *Carpe Diem* comes to mind. It means we should make the most out of the time we do have. Time

is our most valuable nonrenewable resource. You may not get to choose the amount of time you spend with your children, but you can choose the value of the time you spend with your children. Each moment is precious, so never pass up a good opportunity for quality time to help your child grow!

The value of the time we spend is predicated upon our ability to create a safe space for our child’s thoughts, feelings, emotions and ideas. Sometimes, a child may need a directive parent who can give them systematic guidance to overcome an obstacle. Other times, a child may simply need a listening ear. Regardless of how big or small a problem may seem, we must attentively listen to our children and adapt to their specific needs at that moment. That’s what teaches children how to thrive when faced with adversity.

One thing I’ve learned as a Marine officer is this: Commitment and conviction come from within. You can’t win their minds if you don’t win their hearts. Nonetheless, I’ve taught hundreds of recruits about heroes like Admiral James Stockdale who stayed calm in the face of extremely challenging circumstances. Having established his stoicism as a standard to live up to, it’s no surprise that my recruits and I naturally teach this philosophy to our children. However, the

unintentional effect of this lesson is that it encourages children to suppress their emotions and isolate themselves from us—the adults to whom they look for cues, boundaries and values. We win our children’s hearts by consistently showing care and compassion as we encourage them to be open and transparent with their emotions.

That requires us to be emotionally present when we’re physically present. Never underutilize or underestimate the value of an affectionate hug. Additionally, we should incorporate professional counseling into our routines. Think of your collaborative efforts with professional counselors as “preventative maintenance” instead of simply “major repair.” Professionals have the tools and insights to help children build mental resilience and cope with various challenges like loss and grief. Therefore, we should surround our children with the people, resources and social support that gives them a sense of belonging and helps them thrive in good and bad times. The combination of their community and experiences creates an environment of growth and resilience.

That environment is incomplete and unbalanced without you helping your children live their lives to the fullest. The phrase “*laissez les bons temps rouler*” encapsulates the lifestyle I encourage in my home. This phrase serves as a reminder to have fun and enjoy the pleasures of life. It’s easy to become overwhelmed when we’re faced with the challenge of leading our children. However, I encourage you to embrace this lifestyle and make the most out of your children’s youthfulness.

Don’t downplay the weight of your children’s sacrifice but highlight the exciting opportunities that arise from military service. Whether it’s enjoying warm beaches in San Diego, climbing the mountains in Colorado, scuba diving in Japan, or anything in between, the opportunities are endless! Expose your children to the wide variety of cultures across the world as you progress throughout your career. By doing so, you are capitalizing on the advantages of their military service and making them more resilient in the end.

*Author’s bio: Maj Olaolu Ogunyemi is a husband, father, mentor, and award-winning writer with a passion for working with children and families. He is the author of the Amazon children’s books, “Crow From the Shadow,” “Horace the Horsefly,” and “Billy Dipper’s Time to Shine.” Connect with him at [www.parent-child-connect.com](http://www.parent-child-connect.com).*