

OPERATION Military Kids

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A collaborative, informational meeting to aid military children took place at the Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds in Noblesville, Ind., March 13.

School administrators, military support groups and volunteers gathered to connect, discuss and learn about ways to assist children overcoming stresses, as a result of a family member's military deployment.

Operation Military Kids is a program that was initiated by U.S. Army Child and Youth Services, working through the 4-H program and other volunteer organizations that connect with military youth, providing support through a network of community resources.

The 4-H organization was first sought out by the organizing group for this program because of its presence in every county throughout the United States. The program now exists in 42 states.

"The idea of the meeting is to give training to the educators to know what steps they can take to form the right connections," said Judy Hauser, 4-H project coordinator.

She stressed how important these connections were in the establishment of resources to assist the military children in times of trouble or confusion. Educators ascertaining resources with the family support groups and other volunteers was the major aspect of the conference.

The 4-H organization provides a vast number of extracurricular activities away from the school too. Arts and crafts, photography and working with animals to ease children's minds from the negative parts of a loved one's deployment, are just some of the programs available.

"Socially it gives them support through being able to interact

with other kids on their level, do fun activities away from school, plus gain support from the volunteers," said Amy Nierman, 4-H member with the Purdue Extension.

"It gives the youth an opportunity to meet with other kids throughout the county, focusing on things they are interested in, or maybe they want to have more knowledge about, or pursue a future career in," she added.

During family meetings, such as the Family Readiness Group for the Indiana National Guard, 4-H volunteers try to provide the children with fun educational activities, accompanied by packets created specifically for military kids.

Another program with which the 4-H involves itself is the assembly and distribution of "Hero Packs" for children. Hero Packs are backpacks or sacks filled with fun things to occupy the children's time constructively.

"The kids can have their own support group, get to know each other, have fun together, and understand they're not the only ones that are in those circumstances," said Hauser.

"When you work on projects with kids, they tend to talk more and open up about things," said Jacque McBride, South Elementary School counselor in Danville, Ind.

She stated that the program had given her a lot of insight on things that could be done when dealing with children of military members.

"I think it will help give me some ideas on who to talk to, and things to do with them. I would like to be more connected with them and be more open. I've been brainstorming some ideas on, like, a wall of fame for the military to put up in the hallway and things like that," she added. **R&NG**



A collaborative informational meeting to help educators better understand the emotional needs of military children whose parent or parents are serving on active duty or deployed to a war zone, took place at the Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds in Noblesville, Ind., on March 14. Speaking before an audience of school administrators, military support groups and other volunteers, Maj. Cathy Van Bree, State Family Program Director for the Indiana National Guard, addresses some of the unique needs and emotional stresses that military children experience.

Photo by Sgt. Michael Krieg, Indiana National Guard.