

Continued from "Supporting Military Families: A View from the Inside."

13. What tips do you have for school professionals on how they can best support military families who have a child living with a mental health condition?

Most of the schools on our military installation understand the military culture and lifestyle. We work with them on awareness and education when we have a unit deploying. We try to get into the schools to let them know about the tools they may need and to identify students who may need additional support. For example, a student may be doing quite well in school but may hear that a soldier was killed. That soldier could be the student's parent. This will certainly impact how the student acts in school the next day.

I am also trained as an education advocate so I can go into schools with parents to any of their meetings and give suggestions on what school-based services and supports are needed. I am there for the child and to support the parents. We all work very well together. If NAMI leaders get in touch with the EFMP, they may also be able to work with schools on the military installation.

14. Do you think the schools do a good job at identifying the kids who are struggling?

Unfortunately, sometimes it may feel like schools label students who are struggling as "bad," "dumb" or "lazy" before they realize that there may be something else going on, like a serious mental health condition. Sometimes schools only see a snippet of what is going on so they do not always understand a student's behavior in context. Many children have the ability to mask their emotions to fit in so we do not see what is really going on until it really gets out of hand. Sometimes we have more of a reactive approach instead of a proactive one.

I try to tell parents that the best thing they can do for their child is to go to their child's school to educate school personnel on their child's mental health condition and to find ways to work with the school. Families do not need to bare their soul to their child's school but just give them enough information so that everyone can work together to ensure that the child is successful in school. Unfortunately, families are hesitant to do this because of the stigma surrounding mental health conditions.