

Resource Review: Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness

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Abstract

Youth-serving professionals have unique opportunities to help support military families in promoting positive youth development. The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness provides information, resources, and tools on effective programs and practices youth development professionals, schools, and communities can use to help support military families. It is a comprehensive, trusted, easy-to-navigate source of evidence-based and evidence-informed resources, technical assistance, and support that helps professionals who support military families do that work more effectively.

Key words: military families, readiness and resilience, military-serving professionals, military programing, program effectiveness

Introduction

Across the nation and around the world, more than 2.1 million men and women serve in the U.S. military (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). When dependents are included, the number jumps to 4.7 million, with 1.7 million being children (Department of Defense [DoD], 2018).

Given this large number, it is highly likely that military youth will be part of many classrooms, after-school programs, 4-H clubs, and faith-based congregations. Although most military-connected children and families are doing well, some struggle and others could benefit from greater support given the realities of military service (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2019). Youth-serving professionals have unique opportunities to help support military families in promoting positive youth development



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while also working to help prevent and address potential problems among service members and their families (Ames et al., 2011; Clary & Ferrari, 2015; Ferrari, 2015; Huebner, 2019).

When youth development professionals, schools, and communities come together to help support military families, service members are more likely to be mission-ready and achieve success (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mogil et al., 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). However, choosing a program from the thousands available can be overwhelming. Choosing an effective program can be an even greater challenge.

To help make identifying effective programs less daunting, the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness (Clearinghouse hereafter) provides tools and information on effective programs and practices for military-serving professionals. They also provide technical assistance and coaching.

Clearinghouse Description

The Clearinghouse is an applied research center that provides tools and information to strengthen military families. Their mission centers on developing trusting, collaborative relationships with partners to engage with U.S. military families to ensure they are supported by effective programs and practices.

Funding for the Clearinghouse is provided by the DoD through a partnership between USDA's National Institute of Food Agriculture (NIFA) and the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy in cooperation with The Pennsylvania State University. The Clearinghouse provides their services to military-serving professionals at no cost because of grant funding provided by DoD and NIFA.

The Clearinghouse helps military family-serving professionals identify, select, implement, and evaluate evidence-based and promising programs, practices, and resources on a wide range of family life, parenting, and mental health issues. The website is its primary public interface.

Background

The Clearinghouse team consists of 55 interdisciplinary Penn State faculty, staff, and students. The large team indicates the breadth of applied research, resources, and associated supports they offer professionals who provide direct programming, services, and support to military families.

Website Features

On the homepage, users will find information grouped in six main sections, in addition to the search feature. Brief descriptions of each section, presented thematically, follow.

General information about the Clearinghouse is presented on the homepage and repeated in the "About," "Services," and "Contact Us" sections. See Table 1 for an overview of each.

Table 1. Clearinghouse Website General Information Sections

Website section	Brief description
About	<p>"What does the Clearinghouse do?" and four subpages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission/Vision 2. Partnerships – lists 10 partner organizations; there is no description of any of the organizations, but URLs are provided. 3. Team – lists the team members and a brief biographical information including phone and email. Photos of the team members are provided and help create a sense of community. Several team members do not have any biographical information posted. The page has a different layout without links back to the "About" organizational structure, so users need to use the browser's back button. 4. Employment – includes internship and assistantship opportunities. A link opens a new browser window and takes users to the Penn State employment website, which is set to prepopulate with any Clearinghouse job vacancies.
Services	<p>"Services We Offer" and six subpages that offer short descriptions that can sometimes have an "infomercial" feel. Some have links to other pages on the website. They are listed in the following order:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Applied Research 2. Curriculum Development – links to 'Learning Solutions' 3. Learning Solutions – they use the ADDIE model 4. Program Evaluation 5. Program Implementation – links to "Program Implementation Toolkit" – links to 'Continuum of Evidence' database and "Program Implementation Toolkit" 6. Program Selection <p>All are also featured on the homepage, except 'Learning Solutions' is titled 'Instructional Design.'</p>

Table 1. (continued)

Website section	Brief description
Contact Us	This is one of the most helpful features of the Clearinghouse website: Technical assistance is available via “live chat,” a toll-free phone helpline, and email. Live chat and the toll-free line are staffed from 9 AM to 5 PM EST (closed for major holidays). These allows users to connect with members of the team to ask questions or get more information.

The “Program Reviews” section is one of the most robust on the Clearinghouse website. This link takes users to a substantial, searchable database, referred to as the “Continuum of Evidence.” Clearinghouse staff reviewed prevention, treatment, and education programs to assess their effectiveness and potential benefit to military personnel and their families. As of December 2019, the “Continuum” included information about 1,328 programs. Program designations include effective, promising, unclear, and ineffective (see Figure 1). Table 2 provides more details about Continuum features.

Figure 1. Clearinghouse Program Effectiveness Continuum Descriptions

Placement on the Continuum of Evidence						
Effective RCT	Effective Quasi	Promising	Unclear +	Unclear \emptyset	Unclear -	Ineffective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant effects; and Effects lasting at least one year from program completion; and At least one successful external replication; and Randomized controlled study design; and Meets all additional criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant effects; and Effects lasting at least one year from program completion; and At least one successful external replication; and Quasi-experimental study design; and Meets all additional criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant effects. Randomized controlled or quasi-experimental study design. Effects lasting six months from program completion; or No evidence of successful external replication; or Meets 2 or 3 additional criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potentially promising features. Effects lasting less than six months from program completion; or Pre-test/post-test study design; or Meets 0 or 1 additional criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evaluations or mixed results across more than one evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No significant effects or significant negative effects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A program that meets all criteria for an effective placement but fails to demonstrate a significant effect, or demonstrates significant negative effects.

Source: *Continuum of Evidence: Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness (n.d.)*.

Table 2. Clearinghouse Website “Continuum of Evidence” Features

Website feature	Brief description
Search bar	Searches for all words entered. Use the “Filter Options” to refine the search.
Filter options	<p>Nine filters help narrow and refine program searches:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Program title 2. Placement on continuum – effectiveness rating 3. Topic – 44 subcategories 4. Target audience – 19 subcategories 5. Sector – 6 subcategories 6. Military use 7. Facilitator training – 9 subcategories 8. Implementation – 7 subcategories 9. Availability
Results list	<p>Displays programs in an easy-to-read, color-coded by effectiveness rating list.</p> <p>Information includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program name – also a link to more detailed program review fact sheet (see below) • Topic • Target population • Sector • Brief program description <p>Users can click the program name to open the full review fact sheet within the same browser window and easily navigate back to the list by clicking the “Back” link, or choose to click an icon to open it in a new browser tab, in which case users have to navigate back to the full database by changing/clicking their web browser tabs.</p>

Table 2. (continued)

Website feature	Brief description
Program review fact sheet	<p>Displays all items in the results list, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target audience • Summary • Evidence • Components • Previous use • Training • Considerations • Implementation • Time • Cost • Evaluation plan • Contact • Source • References <p>Users can download a formatted PDF version of the program-review fact sheet.</p>
Continuum “About” page	<p>The “About” page provides more specifics, including links to documentation regarding review criteria and a comparison of the Clearinghouse review process to those conducted by other organizations/groups. Programs reviewed and included in the database had evaluations published in peer-reviewed journals. Review criteria includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study design • Representative sample • Modest attrition • Significant effects • Sustained effects • Outcome measures • External replication • Practical significance
Continuum “Submit” page	<p>A “Submit” page provides information for users wishing to submit their program to the Clearinghouse for review and inclusion in the Continuum database.</p>

Another robust website section provides users with information and links to free online learning content, ready-to-use programs, resources, blogs, and other social media. See Table 3 for an overview of the “Resources” section.

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Table 3. Clearinghouse Website “Resources” Sections

Website section	Brief description
“Thrive!”	<p>Thrive is a set of parent-empowerment programs and resources to help military parents ensure their children thrive. It includes four age-based modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Take Root!” 0-3 • “Sprout!” 3-5 • “Grow!” 5-10 • “Branch Out!” 10-18 <p>Each module focuses on three areas: positive parenting practices, parent and child stress management, and strategies for promoting child physical health. Thrive also offers a program for at-risk and high-needs populations.</p>
“5210”	<p>“5210” is a health promotion campaign program designed to spread simple messages to help parents support their children’s healthy eating and physical activity. Each digit represents a health-promoting behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables • 2 or fewer hours of recreational screen time • 1 or more hours of physical activity • 0 sweetened beverages <p>The program has civilian and military versions. The military version has many resources tailored to the specific needs, circumstances, and living arrangements of military families.</p>

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Table 3. (continued)

Website section	Brief description
<p>School resources for military-connected children</p>	<p>Presents information and resources in two subsections: online learning modules and free resources.</p> <p>Free, online learning modules cover 14 broad categories to help school personnel better understand military-connected children and families:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics • Interstate compact • Military culture • Military culture in the classroom • Military supports and services • Parental absence • Parent injury and death • Reintegration • School resources module information handouts • Self-care and mindfulness • Socioemotional learning • Special education • Transition support strategies for school personnel • Transition supports for military-connected parents and students <p>A companion downloadable “toolkit” offers additional resources presented in the 14 modules.</p> <p>The second subsection provides many links to free, evidence-based, ready-to-use resources in nine broad categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics • Behavior and socio-emotional • Deployment and parental absence • Interstate compact • Military child • Military culture • Parental injury • Reintegration • Student grief

Table 3. (continued)

Website section	Brief description
Program implementation toolkit	<p>A set of evidence-informed, easy-to-use informational sheets, resource lists, tools, and worksheets designed and curated to help professionals who work with military families is grouped under five categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving the military population (including veterans) • Getting your community ready • Choosing the right program • Implementing a program with success • Planning for program evaluation
Clearinghouse publications	Links to journal articles, reports, technical assistance rapid literature reviews, videos, and infographics. Some links were broken, and some videos did not play.
External resources	Provides links to three military-focused efforts.
National hotlines and resources	<p>Easy to identify links and information is listed under seven topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence • Installation and state resources • PTSD • Sexual assault • Substance abuse • Suicide • Veterans/military crisis line
FAQ	Several frequently asked questions provide additional information about the Clearinghouse and the services it provides.

The “Projects” section of the website lists very brief descriptions of many current and completed projects. Although the list shows a breadth of partnerships and activities, it is not particularly helpful as no links to additional information are provided.

Strengths and Considerations for Youth Development Professionals

The following strengths and considerations are offered to professionals interested in using this resource:

- The Clearinghouse website is a one-stop shop for youth development professionals looking for effective programs and resources for working with military-connected families.

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- The Continuum of Evidence database provides easy-to-use search and program information to help professionals identify and locate evidence-based programs.
- Clearinghouse resources include a user-friendly, free, program implementation toolkit and resources specifically for school personnel who work with children in military families. These include free online learning modules, access to webinars, videos, virtual learning communities, and social media networks.
- A few potential challenges of the “Program Implementation Toolkit” and other resources are that each component of the Toolkit is an individual download. It would be helpful to have an option to download it as one package, or as five downloads grouped by category. Additionally, the videos on “Clearinghouse Publications” page would benefit from titles and short overviews or introductions.
- A live chat and toll-free helpline provide convenient support for users of the website, as well as easy connection to the Clearinghouse’s free technical assistance and coaching.

Conclusion

The primary focus of Clearinghouse efforts is to apply science to meet challenges identified by military partners. It exists to increase professionals’ capacity to strengthen military family readiness, resilience, and overall well-being. The Clearinghouse is successful in achieving its stated mission: It is a comprehensive, trusted, easy-to-navigate source of evidence-based, and evidence-informed resources, technical assistance, and support that helps professionals who assist military families do that work more effectively and with confidence.

How to Access

Professionals can access this resource at <https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu>.

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