

**“It’s hard for me, I move a lot.”**

## **Designing and implementing a one-year Pilot Project to Support Service Children at Halton School during periods of Mobility and Parental Deployment.**

***Joy O’Neill***

### **Introduction**

Halton School is a small primary school in Buckinghamshire which has 92 children on roll. Approximately 70% are children from HM Forces families, predominantly RAF. As a result, approximately 50% of the school population changes every year as Service families are posted into or away from the Station. This occurs in addition to the normal transitions into Reception and out of Year 6.

In 2008 I undertook research, based on the question ‘What would an effective ‘Transition and Induction’ Policy look like in relation to Service Children at Halton School?’ in which pupils, parents, staff and governors discussed the issues that arise from ‘Transition and Parental Deployment’.

In response to these results, I designed a ‘Mobility Project’ to support the needs of Service Children as they joined or left the school and, in particular, during periods of parental deployment overseas. This included establishing the post of a ‘Mobility Co-ordinator’ (funding for initially 1 year by extended services money) to work with Children and families both at Halton School and within the local area in an outreach capacity. It was also felt that this enhanced pastoral care would help to support the attainment and achievement of *all* children at the school.

### **Definitions**

Dobson and Henthorne (1999: 5) define pupil mobility as ‘A child joining or leaving a school at a point other than the normal age at which children start or finish their education at that school, whether or not this involves a move of home’.

Newman and Blackburn (2002: 1) define transition as ‘Any episode of change, including progression from one developmental stage to another, change in schools, entering or leaving the care system, loss, bereavement, parental incapacity or entry to adulthood’.

The accepted definition of 'deployment' is the assignment of military personnel to unaccompanied tours of duty and is generally understood to mean movement to an 'operational' area such as Afghanistan although, in reality, includes areas such as the Falkland Islands where combat operations are not currently ongoing . The 'Deployment Cycle' is the term used to describe all aspects of the deployment and includes the preparation and pre-deployment training phase, the deployment itself, and the post deployment re-integration phase.

I define a service child as 'a child who has one or both natural or step-parents serving in the regular or reservist military forces at any time during that child's life between birth and eighteen years old'. This differs from the MOD definition of a service child which I believe is too narrow and is in place to meet service administrative requirements rather than the needs of a child in a developmental or educational context.

### **Ethical Considerations and involving the stakeholders in the preparation**

In November 2009 and In accordance with the *Guidelines for Ethical Research of The British Educational Research Association*, I gathered information from governors, staff, children and parents through unstructured interviews and questionnaires. The main purpose of this interview was to understand what issues they faced and how they would like the project to support them.

The main points that families raised were:

- they wanted a guarantee that their children would get a school place in the immediate local area when arriving in a new location.
- they wanted to be allowed to take children out of school for family breaks before, during (rest and recuperation periods) and after operational deployments without fear of getting into trouble.
- they wanted non-service organisations and communities to have a better understanding of the issues facing service families such as the lack of family support when they move into a new area.
- children were worried about settling in and understanding the new school routines and expectations, losing and making friends and falling behind with work.
- staff were concerned about the timely transfer of their child's records from previous schools and the emotional upset for children arising from leaving their old school and moving to a new school, home and area.

- they wanted the Mobility Co-ordinator to support children and families in the following ways:
  - Working closely with parents
  - Being available to chat (pupils and parents)
  - Offering children opportunities to catch up on missed work
  - Formalising the transfer process and monitoring the settling in process
  - Using the buddy system
  - Signposting to other information sources/organisations they might need.

## **Project**

The Mobility Co-ordinator has taken great care to work with individual children and families and the approaches she has used have been tailored to their specific needs, linking with outside agencies for specific intervention as required. The children of Halton School are part of a complex community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and it is absolutely right that the school should not consider itself to be working in isolation. The Mobility Project has had a very positive impact on collaboration and information sharing especially where child protection has been a concern, or where a (TAC) Team around the child has been put in place.

In addition to Halton School, the project also supported 3 schools and 3 early years settings during the year. Over the course of the project a total of 74 children (aged two-11) have worked with the co-ordinator. Of these, 67 were from Halton School (of which 50 were Service children and 17 were non-service children) and 7 children were from outreach schools and settings. A total of 31 families have worked with the co-ordinator. Of these 28 were from Halton School (of which 22 were service families and 6 were from non-service families) and 3 families were from outreach schools and settings.

Some issues have been resolved quickly; others have been ongoing for some months and some families or children have worked with multiple issues. To the surprise of the staff and Governors, a much wider variety of issues have been identified during the project.

These include the emotional concerns of both pupils and families (in respect of a wide range of family pressures such as separation, divorce, domestic violence and parental alcoholism), the Special Educational Needs (SEN) of some pupils, those pupils who have English as an Additional Language (EAL), the additional academic support required by some pupils (as identified by the school), the medical issues affecting some pupils and families (and the impacts on family life that may therefore arise), the challenging behaviour displayed by some

pupils (both in and out of school), the financial insecurity experienced by some families, the friendship concerns of some pupils (often as a result in the change in class dynamics as children join and leave the school), pregnancy, adoption, and their impact on a family dynamic, the effect of a bereavement in a family, and child protection issues that have become apparent through the course of the year.

Parents reported feeling calm and better able to cope after sessions with the Mobility Co-ordinator. One mother told us “It would be good to have this facility in all schools” and a father who has recently returned from deployment explained “It helped me when I was away to know the school were looking out for my child”.

Staff had observed high levels of emotional and behavioural issues in some children, particularly following their arrival in the school or as they prepared to leave it. Both of these processes are transitions that the majority of school children would expect to make a few times in their lives. However, Service Children may change schools up to ‘11 times’ during their school career (Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children’s Fund, 2009). It is important to understand that while Service children share many similarities, they also have their own unique personalities and they will respond to transition differently. Children who appear best able to cope with transitions are those who exhibit good self-esteem and secure attachments to their family, and who have successfully negotiated transitions in the past.

One of the objectives of the Mobility Project was to provide robust induction and departure procedures to alleviate any worries that pupils and parents may have. This year, new pupils have reported a positive transition experience “I had a really good welcome into the school, I had a buddy and I made friends quickly” and “She helps you settle into the school quickly”.

Parental deployment can be particularly traumatic for children, especially with such a high level of media coverage of ongoing military operations at present. Children commented that “My Dad goes away a lot: he’s in Afghanistan at the moment”, “When my Dad’s away at night I miss him”. For each child, the levels of trauma experienced will be different. I suggest that these life experiences of service children differ significantly than those of the majority of non-service children.

Whatever the cause of the child’s upset, the staff have noted that the outcome is often the same. Children with emotional or behavioural issues are often unable to concentrate in class. ‘There is a clear physiological explanation for this: the perception of threat causes the release of the hormones cortisol and adrenalin which block cognitive and memory processes

and trigger the fight, flight or freeze reaction' 'Children (or adults) who are anxious, stressed, alienated or angry can't communicate well' (Crow *et al.*, 2008: 24). The Mobility Project has had a positive impact on these children by giving them time to talk about any worries, building self-esteem, providing emotional support, teaching coping strategies and trying to promote resilience, to be able to 'recover from setbacks' (Daniels *et al.*, 2003: 110).

## **Key Findings**

1. The experiences of service children are unique, offering both challenges and benefits.
2. Service children are individuals and 'one size' does not fit all, some children thrive and flourish while others struggle with elements of their life.
3. The resilience of the children will affect how they cope with the issues they face.
4. The quality of relationships in their early years and the success they have already had in negotiating previous transitions will support resilience. However, strategies can be put in place to support a child's resilience. As discussed by Newman (1999) children are most likely to demonstrate resilience if they are easy going and have recognised aptitudes and good social skills.
5. The support of the headteacher and senior management team was vital to the success of the project.
6. Recruiting governors from HM Forces and their families has played a large role in aiding the schools understanding of the issues facing service children.
7. It was very important that the Mobility Co-ordinator had an understanding of the needs of service children and their families as well as experience in education.
8. Without the collaboration and support of all members of staff the project would have not have been as successful.
9. Effective links to outside agencies, service welfare organisations, the local civilian and Service communities were established and maintained in order to best support the needs of the pupils and families.
10. Pupils and families were listened to and encouraged to take an active role in the design of the bespoke support package.
11. A robust and consistent induction and leaving process is in place to support every new arrival and leaver.
12. Strong multi-agency links mean that pupils and parents can be put in touch with specialist professionals when required.
13. The additional funding for all service children across Buckinghamshire will allow this project to continue until at least 2013.

14. Schools and settings with smaller numbers of service children or outside agencies who have never worked with them, do not always have a clear understanding of the pressures facing Service children and their families.

### **And finally...**

I believe that the success of the Mobility Project at Halton School shows that even quite modest financial investment can have a very significant and positive impact on the well being of service children. If a co-ordinated, cohesive and flexible approach is taken by all parties, senior school management and staff alike, a great deal can be achieved to the benefit of the pupils themselves, their families and the wider school community.

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**Autobiography:** I am a Service wife and mother, early years teacher, governor, member of SCISS National Executive (Service Children in State Schools) as well as TACTYC and founder and chair of the Bucks/Oxon SCISS group.