

Mar 28, 2012 By Judy Lin

Helping military families find peace in times of war



In the decade since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 2 million American service members have served in military operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, putting their lives at risk in environments steeped in terror and violence. Many of these soldiers have returned home struggling with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, brain damage or other injuries.

Struggling along with them, but too often forgotten, are their families — more than one million spouses and nearly two million children. Hardest hit of all are families that have to live through multiple deployments — emotionally charged separations and reunions that bring with them high risks for marital conflict, child abuse and psychological problems.

Stepping in to support these families is [Families OverComing Under Stress \(FOCUS\)](#), a UCLA program that helps them build on their strengths and face adversity together. Founded in 2008 as a collaboration between UCLA and the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, FOCUS has touched the lives of more than 300,000 people at sites at some two dozen Navy, Marine, Army and Air Force installations around the country as well as in Okinawa, Japan.



Dr. Patricia Lester, founding director of FOCUS.

FOCUS was developed by UCLA psychiatrist [Dr. Patricia Lester](#), who directs the program and is also medical director of the Child and Family Trauma Service on campus, along with colleagues Dr. Robert Pynoos and Dr. William Saltzman and, at Harvard Medical School, Dr. William Beardslee.

"The FOCUS program speaks to my sense of our responsibility, as a nation, to our service members and their families," said Lester, the Jane and Marc Nathanson Family Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. "Trauma can disrupt and derail families, reverberating through the entire family system."

Of particular concern, Lester said, are the children in military families — 78 percent of whom are 11 or younger. These children are highly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, behavioral disruptions and academic difficulties.

FOCUS empowers families to prepare in advance for deployments, and survive and even thrive while their service members are away. When they return, the program helps them reintegrate and reconnect.

"The idea is not mental health treatment," said Lester. "It's prevention — helping people manage under stress without falling into a category of needing mental health treatment."

Over eight weeks, families meet with FOCUS counselors who guide each member in identifying and sharing their concerns and fears about a spouse or parent being deployed to a war zone. They also receive "resiliency training" to learn specific communication and problem-solving skills.



Before FOCUS, this couple says, their son would break down at any talk of "daddy being gone" on deployment. Their son can now calmly say he'll miss his father but knows they'll be okay.

Honest and effective communication, said Lester, is a central issue in many military families, where it sometimes seems easier to avoid potentially difficult conversations.

"It seems like a simple thing ... to ask your child what's on their mind," said Lester, "but some of these parents worry, 'What if they ask me if I'm going to be hurt? If I'm going to die?'"

One father who took the advice of a resiliency trainer to have a conversation with his son said he was surprised to learn what his son was worried about.

"His concept of what I was going to be doing was pretty scary. If I were thinking that, *I'd* be worried too," said the father, who was able to reassure his son.

Children who are 10 or younger, Lester said, may have spent their entire lives watching a parent repeatedly deploy to war. "This is their full experience — having a sense of pervasive danger at home and concern about their parent who's in theater."

To help children express their feelings, FOCUS counselors give them a tool called a "feeling thermometer" and advise them to draw pictures. One little girl drew pictures of robbers breaking into her home and wildfires all around her. "These were feelings that she had not shared with her parents, but that were fueling her anxieties at school and at home," Lester said.

Another tool, a family deployment timeline, helps bring the family together as they move through the process and share their individual perspectives.

Said a mother from the Ventura County Naval Base in Point Hueneme, Calif., "The family timeline really helped me see how emotionally up and down our family is during a deployment cycle," adding that she also learned that "all military families go through that. You see it black-and-white that you're not the only one out there."



The difficulties don't disappear when a service member returns home, Lester said, particularly if a parent comes back with injuries or significant combat stress reactions. A child who playfully jumps on his dad's back may unknowingly trigger an extreme startle response — pulse racing, sweating, intense fear. Parents who find themselves reacting this way may try to protect their children by emotionally distancing themselves or even leaving their families. FOCUS teaches families skills for dealing with "trauma reminders" in ways that keep families together.

Lester and her colleagues recently published research that showed that stressed-out families showed significant improvement after completing the program, and that the benefits were long-term.

"Families like this program," Lester said. "They let us know that it's really strengthening their families and helping them manage these transitions effectively. We see improvement in family communication, family functioning and problem-solving from beginning to end. And, most dramatically, we see the kids doing a whole lot better."

Military leaders like FOCUS as well. According to Cpt. Robert L. Koffman, a combat and operational stress control consultant and director of psychological health for the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, "For married service members, one of the best ways leadership can enhance psychological resilience is to ensure the family unit remains strong, healthy and intact."



With demand for the program growing, FOCUS has started an online program as well as versions for parents with very small children and couples without children. The program is also extending its services beyond military installations, with a pilot program operating in the San Diego school system. And last year, funding from the McCormick Foundation and Major League Baseball established the Nathanson Welcome Back Veterans UCLA Family Resilience Center at the Semel Institute, which is working to reach families of veterans living throughout the L.A. region.

Learn more and view a video of military families at the [FOCUS website](#).