

Grandparents play vital role for many families during wartime deployments

By [TERI WEAVER](#)

Stars and Stripes

Published: November 27, 2010



Pfc. Janie King points at a photo of her daughter, Saniya, as her husband and Saniya's father, Sgt. Christopher King, looks on. The Kings are currently on a 12-month deployment in Diyala as part of the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. They left Saniya with Christopher King's parents in Maryland. "A lot of people say we are heroes for what we do," King, 25, wrote in an e-mail after becoming too emotional to talk about her daughter. "But the heroes in my eyes are the grandparents or people who are providing for our children as if we never left."

TERI WEAVER/STARS AND STRIPES

TOKYO — The very first night Debbie Nichols tucked her granddaughter in bed after taking custody of her, Nichols got a glimpse of what was to come.

"Grandma, should I call you Mommy now?" 6-year-old Bailey asked.

She was confused because her mom, Air Force Tech Sgt. Erin Caldwell, had just left Luke Air Force Base in Arizona for Afghanistan. Bailey and her 10-year-old sister, Ivie, had gone to live with their grandparents just outside of Los Angeles.

"No. Your mom is coming back," Nichols said. "I'm your grandma. But I'm going to have to act like your mom sometimes."

Grandparents who take custody of their grandchildren during wartime deployments do much more than act the parenting part, as Nichols and her husband, Alan, discovered in early 2008 when their daughter left for a four-month deployment.

The transition forced the Nicholsons to become parents of two generations with vastly different needs. One has a parent-teacher conference. The other is at war.

“We recognize that families serve,” said Barbara Thompson of the Pentagon’s Office of Family Policy/Children and Youth, acknowledging the role of grandparents. “It’s no longer the nuclear family that serves.”

The military doesn’t track how many children are cared for by grandparents during wartime deployments. Nor does it focus any family programs on the special challenges that grandparents face, even though countless servicemembers couldn’t fulfill their orders in Iraq or Afghanistan without their help.

“These grandparents are serving a really important role,” said Amy Goyer, a multigenerational issues expert with AARP. “Without them, what would our country be doing? It seems to be taken for granted.”

‘It’s a very noble thing’

When servicemembers deploy, someone must take full custody of their children to ensure their schooling, health care and safety. The military facilitates much of that transfer, requiring parents to complete “family care plans” to transfer legal authority to family members or close friends and provide them proper paperwork so the kids can get access to the military’s Tricare health insurance system from anywhere in the States.

But grandparents experience unique challenges when they assume the role of primary caregiver. They are older and may be out of practice in day-to-day parenting and school-related activities, and they might not be near a military base or understand military procedure.

Some experts — and some military officers in the field — say the Pentagon should pay closer attention and target assistance to grandparents for their key role in the war effort.

“They are altering their own lives for the greater purpose of the children going forward and fulfilling their role to the military,” said Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, a general practitioner and psychiatrist who heads the nonprofit organization Foundation for Grandparenting. “It’s a very noble thing for the grandparents to do.”

No targeted help

There are no military programs designed specifically for grandparents, but Thompson said nonmilitary full-time caregivers are given access to any base program the child needs, including the commissary or exchange stores. The military also has resources and a 24-hour toll-free number for counseling at www.militaryonesource.com.

Families living away from the child’s home military base can turn to bases in their areas or National Guard units for help. But those programs aren’t always close to Grandma and Grandpa’s house. Even when they are, the programs often don’t have grandparents in mind.

“So many grandparents tell me — the military isn’t equipped to deal with them,” Goyer said in a telephone interview. “Some get involved with the military family groups. In some cases, they adapt well. In other cases, they feel like, ‘It’s not for me.’”

“They feel very isolated: ‘I’m not a part of this military community. I’m just going to try to raise this child on my own.’”

Col. Malcolm Frost commands the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, currently in Iraq. His wife, Col. Patricia Frost, commands the 500th Military Intelligence Brigade at Schofield Barracks.

In 2006, both officers got orders to Iraq. They decided to send their daughter, Alexis, then 2, to Patricia’s parents in Texas. Because of training schedules and extended deployments, Alexis ended up staying with her grandparents for two years.

Patricia Frost’s parents are retired from the military and live just north of Houston. They had military identification cards and easy access to bases, Malcolm Frost said in September from his office at Warhorse. But that didn’t make it easy.

“They understand the system,” he said of his in-laws. “But I don’t think after 32 years they expected to have to serve like that again.”

It’s a definite role change, Debbie Nichols said.

Some days, “you might not want this responsibility,” she said. “And then [comes the] guilt, because you feel you shouldn’t be thinking that way.”

Some legal changes are making grandparenting easier for military families.

Two years ago, the Family and Medical Leave Act was expanded to allow legal guardians dealing with deployments, such as grandparents, time off work when needed to care for their new charges, according to Kelly Hruska, a government relations staffer at the National Military Family Association. The nonprofit group advocates for issues involving spouses and children of military members.

But when it comes to specific needs for grandparents and deployments, Hruska said, she refers inquiries to AARP. (The association’s website, www.aarp.org, encourages grandparents to share their issues.)

When Lt. Col. James Isenhower, commander of the 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, part of the 25th Infantry Division now serving in Iraq, was asked about the situation, he opened his notebook and began taking notes. In all the family briefings he’s had as a commander, he said he had never thought to ask about how grandparents are helping and what they might need.

Changing places

Grandparents often don't get much warning before the responsibility shifts, and there are endless details to be worked out.

"'I'm going to Afghanistan,' " Debbie Nichols recalls hearing from her daughter in December 2007. "'You're going to have to take possession of the kids Jan. 4.' "

By the first week of 2008, Ivie and Bailey moved from Luke Air Force Base in Glendale, Ariz., and into their mom's old house in Placentia, Calif., near Anaheim. Their grandparents, Alan, 60, and Debbie, 57, became their legal guardians.

Caldwell's ex-husband is an active dad, but in late 2007 he was working a night shift and was a member of the Arizona National Guard, Caldwell said during a phone interview. Leaving Ivie and Bailey with their grandparents made the most sense.

Suddenly, after 13 years without a kid in the house, life for the Nicholsons meant helping with homework, putting family dinner on the table and relearning tricks for getting gum out of a little girl's hair.

Before the switch, the girls would visit "once or twice a year, a week at a time," Debbie Nichols said of Ivie and Bailey, now 13 and 9. "I didn't understand what deployment meant."

To make it easier for grandparents to assume the added responsibility, Kornhaber suggests that parents make it clear the rule-making authority is switching to the grandparents. At the same time, he said, grandparents should try to abide by rules and ethics similar to what the child has at home.

The parents, meanwhile, must cede responsibility to the grandparents during the separation, he said. No parenting from afar.

Debbie Nichols and her daughter did just that. While the girls lived in their grandparents' house, they followed Grandma's rules: TV is OK before and after school as long as the homework is done; the bed must be made, but the clothes inside the drawers can get a little messy.

When Caldwell came back from her deployment, she waited until the girls were back under her roof in Arizona to impose her neater, stricter ways.

What struck Malcolm Frost and his wife the most, he said, were the changes in family dynamics that took place during the two years they were separated from Alexis.

"We left her in diapers and came home to a walking, talking, flipping-her-hair child," Patricia Frost said in a phone interview from Hawaii. "My mom potty-trained her."

The new normal

After the deployment is over, grandparents can be left with separation anxieties of their own as the family readjusts.

In the days after Caldwell and the girls went back to Arizona, Debbie Nichols said she was relieved.

“My daughter was safe and back with her children,” she said.

But soon she found she could not pull herself together.

“I would cry and cry and cry,” she said.

She finally called her daughter, crying, unable to say what was wrong. Not having the girls around was almost too much to take.

“I know,” Caldwell told her mom, “because I’ve been there.”

After her time as a caregiver, Debbie Nichols wrote and self-published a book, “Deployed: Grandparents being Parents.” She mailed copies to members of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and to President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama.

She also launched a website, www.grandparentsbeingparents.com. In recent weeks she has reached out to military bases and National Guard offices in southern California to offer advice to grandparents who plan on being surrogate parents during deployments. She’s speaking at local groups like the American Legion and has done radio interviews to talk about her experience.

“I just have to share it,” she said. “I feel I’m on a mission.”

Many military parents base life decisions on who will keep their children while they deploy. Knowing there’s a well-informed grandparent in the picture makes it easier for some.

Sgt. Christopher King and his wife, Pfc. Janie King, are together now in Diyala province on a 12-month deployment as part of the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. Their daughter, Saniya, has been with grandparents in his hometown of Kent Island, Md., on the Chesapeake Bay, since she was 5 months old. As a new mother, Janie King could have delayed her deployment. But she wanted to serve, and she wanted to stay close to her husband. The couple plan to spend their January leave in Maryland, celebrating Saniya’s first birthday.

“A lot of people say we are heroes for what we do,” King, 25, wrote in an e-mail after becoming too emotional to talk about her daughter. “But the heroes in my eyes are the grandparents or people who are providing for our children as if we never left.”

“My daughter is extremely happy and loved by all. Knowing that she is in great care/hands makes my job, my time, and this deployment a thousand times better and helps me accomplish the mission,” she wrote.

“They are my heroes.”

weavert@pstripes.osd.mil

“Used with permission from the Stars and Stripes. © 2010 Stars and Stripes. www.stripes.com”