



# DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION, RESILIENCE AND READINESS

## Making Army Bases Holiday Havens for Kids

By Kim Ferraro, *Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness*

There's likely no time of year that kids look forward to more than the December holidays. It is a magical month, when homes and stores glow with lights, trendy toys are on display everywhere, and iced gingerbread replaces wheat bread in diets. Kids everywhere are under the seasonal spell, but for those whose parents serve in the military, that spell can be broken at times when they think of their far-off relatives and friends. And for military parents, with physically and mentally taxing 24/7 jobs, it is a daunting challenge to meet their children's expectations, which are as high as Santa's sleigh in the sky.

Army bases, while no North Pole substitute, do their best to transform into spellbinding playlands that will rival those of the outside world and dazzle kids big and small. Fort Campbell, in Tennessee, and Fort Johnson, in Louisiana, are just two that carry out this top-priority mission.

Fort Campbell kicks off the festivities with a Winter Wonderland, an extravagant two-day affair featuring brilliant lights, handmade crafts, food trucks, caroling and music from the Army band. Over the month, kids have multiple opportunities to engage with the season's twinkle-eyed MVP: at a photo session; during a breakfast-and-bowling event, at which Santa gives each child a gift; and in his "satellite workshop," within the base's library. At the tree lighting, "Santa usually arrives on a fire truck with lights flashing and helps to turn on the tree lights, along with a child and the commander," says Melissa Schaffner, NAF Support chief. "Seeing their faces with smiles and laughter as they receive a gift or experience something festive has the same impact on the adults around them, as if we were all related to one another—and in a way, we are. No matter where in the world these children may be as they follow their parents through Army transitions, we strive to provide a feeling of home and family."

At Fort Johnson, the staff of the Morale, Welfare and Recreation division also tackles holiday entertainment plans with military precision. "We are a very robust organization that provides programs and events for all audiences in our community," says Stormie Tippit, NAF Support chief. Along with traditional activities like a tree-lighting ceremony and visits with Santa, the base offers more unusual recreational options, including "elf hunting" on the golf course (à la the game Elf on the Shelf) and a brunch with the Grinch. Families on a tight budget can snag a free tree and gifts to put under it, courtesy of Trees for Troops and the toy drive. Together, parents and kids can burn off cookie and eggnog energy in the Jingle Bell 5K.

Yet despite the abundance of festivities, kids may feel twinges of sadness over being apart from friends and other loved ones outside of their military community. This is natural, and parents should stress that to their children, says Lt. Col. Justin Orton, the chief of the department of behavioral health at Blanchfield Army Community Hospital at Fort Campbell. "As children grieve the loss of having loved ones surrounding them during the holiday season, know that they grieve in a variety of ways, grief may be fleeting in that it is not time limited, and grief can spike as parents rekindle holiday traditions," he explains.

To ensure that their kids feel much more merry than melancholy during the so-called most wonderful time of the year, Orton advises parents to be empathetic, rather than impatient, when children express disappointment that they can't be with buddies, and then come up with alternative ways they can connect with friends. "Perhaps they virtually join them for part of Thanksgiving dinner, or maybe they can virtually watch the football game. You might even contact the parents of your child's friend to coordinate something fun they can create, build or make together,

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virtually. Creating new traditions with absent friends and loved ones will offer a sense of connection and fulfillment.”

“Holidays can be happy and stressful at the same time,” adds Lt. Col. Alexander Ragan, chief of behavioral health at Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital at Fort Johnson. It is particularly tough when Soldiers are deployed and their kids must carry out annual rituals without them, he observes. To keep everyone’s spirits up, he suggests making ornaments for each Family member and having the service member send home recordings of themselves reading holiday stories, poems or personal messages reminding children of how much they are loved.

Orton advises leaning on modern technology to allow kids to participate in old-fashioned traditions. So while Grandma is in her kitchen making Christmas cookies from a decades-old family recipe, grandkids can watch her via a video call. Another approach is to start new traditions that become intrinsic to your military Family. “Introduce your kids to what brought you joy during the holiday season when you were a child,” he says. “Let them know how and why this became an important aspect of the holidays for you. By creating your own traditions, you and the children will have something to look forward to in the years to come.”

Because looking forward to Christmas is something kids should be able to do 364 days a year—wherever they are.