WHAT CHILD
As a regular on Civvy Street, I have to be completely honest and say my knowledge of life in the Services doesn’t extend much past that shown on Royal Marines Commando or Royal Navy School. However, after spending three weeks working for the Naval Families Federation, alongside drinking endless cups of tea, I have been fully briefed on all the important aspects of Service life; including the highs and lows of weekending!

Working in the world of education, I didn’t think I would need to learn many more acronyms – how wrong was I! From BOST (Basic Operational Sea Training) to SLIB (Second Leave Is Best), it’s fair to say I have added quite a collection to my repertoire. I also now know that for completely logical reasons a Minehunter ship is made of fibreglass and not metal. A definite Homer Simpson moment on my part!

So now I hear you asking, why would someone who works in education be working with the Naval Families Federation? Well, the Educational Psychology team with whom I am currently placed were keen to build links with organisations that support the needs of Service families. As an organisation that prides itself on offering Royal Navy and Royal Marines families an independent voice and representation, the Naval Families Federation were also keen to gather some views from children. As an Educational Psychologist in training I was tasked to work with around 40 children in the hope of finding out what they think about being part of a Royal Navy or Royal Marines family. My draft was complete and operation ‘what the children think’ or as the Navy would say operation WTCT could commence.

Armed with my brand new hop-a-croc board game and sparkly sea stickers I was fully prepared for execution. I have worked with many children throughout my training, and touch wood things usually go to plan, but I wasn’t quite sure what to expect this time round. What if I asked something that set one of the children off? Would I be needing my box of tissues? What if none of the children wanted to talk to me?

Continued over

“a fighting spirit, ‘can-do’ attitude and a great sense of humour oozed from each and every one of them”

By Larissa Cunningham
Looking back now I had no reason to worry. I have never worked with such a bunch of engaging, positive and well-mannered children. As soon as they walked into the room it was clear that these children were so proud to be part of a Naval Service family. Before we even started playing the game, a fighting spirit, ‘can-do’ attitude and a great sense of humour oozed from each and every one of them; the ethos of the Naval Service already embedded in our next generation of sailors and marines!

From a professional viewpoint I was fascinated by the children’s level of maturity and their insightful thoughts on life as part of a Naval family. Their ability to perspective take was second to none, with many children showing deep concern for how their parents might be feeling. The children explained how they often use Skype to talk to their parent when they are away but that sometimes it’s hard because they don’t always get to talk for long. For many of the children they love it when parents bring them back gifts or shows them pictures of the different countries they have visited. Homecoming day and the chance to go and visit the ship was also highly valued by the children who absolutely beamed when I asked them to tell me what it feels like when Dad or Mum come home.

Whilst some of the children explained that they lived in their own houses, many also lived in Service Family Accommodation or ‘Navy houses’ as they liked to call them. The opportunity to play with children that lived nearby, who also had Mums and Dads in the Royal Navy or Royal Marines, seemed particularly important in allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings with other children who have similar experiences. To be quite honest, at times you would have thought I was talking to a group of reminiscing Veterans!

However, as with all walks of life, you get the good with the bad. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the children explained that the hardest thing about being part of a Naval family is when their parent has to go away, sometimes all week for two years or sometimes for several months at a time. Throughout our lives, all of us will experience separation at some point in one form or another. For some of us these times of separation might only be temporary and quite short-lived, but for others they might be relatively frequent and for extended periods. Children start school, friends and family relocate, family structures change, or employment may take us away from home.

Speaking from a personal perspective, I fully understand the challenges that separation can bring. For many years my Dad worked long, demanding, unsociable hours for his employer (not MOD), checking e-mails, working overseas and handling business calls even on family holidays. This was hard for our family and unfortunately resulted in a marriage breakdown, but here I am, with life experiences and career plans. The road can be bumpy for all.

When your partner is away, how many ‘wine, chocolate and DVD nights’ do you have? Perhaps you join the Facebook WAGs page, meet friends for coffee and cake, or maybe you simply give yourself a pat on the back each time you turn the calendar over.

As adults we all have our own ways of coping with difficult times. I’m not saying that this makes separation any easier for us but just for a moment take a step back and think about how children must feel. They have yet to develop their own coping strategies and let’s face it pocket money day can’t come round quick enough, never mind nine months!

As parents and teachers we can’t take away the fact that having a parent in the Royal Navy or Royal Marines will likely mean that there will be times of prolonged separation. However, what we can do is help children to accept and understand this and to put some things in place to support them if needed. During my time working with the children I had the privilege of seeing lots of wonderful work that is going on in schools to support children from Naval families and I wanted to end by sharing this with you.

Bravo Zulu one and all!
Here are some of the views of the children:

- Mum felt lonely when Dad went away, I tried to keep her company.
- Where I live in a Navy house we all live round in a square. There is a big piece of grass in the middle and we all play together after school.
- At military club we get to talk to each other and share our feelings.
- When he has to go away on a Sunday it’s really hard. We go to the station and then he just goes. I try hard not to cry.
- Other children can imagine what it’s like to have a Dad away on a ship for a long time but they don’t understand.
- I really miss my Dad. I get quite upset because it’s just Mum and I worry about her feeling sad.
- My Mum’s very important to me. She looks after me when Dad is away. I talk to her when I feel upset because I trust her.
- The best thing about having a Dad in the Royal Navy is that I look forward to spending time with him when he comes back.
- My Dad is my hero. I am so proud of him because he goes away and leaves his family to keep our country safe.

What do Service Children Think?

By Larissa Cunningham