

Connecting Kids to the Community

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Fort Leonard Wood Region, Missouri

Military children, like their parents, serve in their own way. They must be brave, helpful and flexible. They have to deal with things such as long separations from a deployed mom or dad, to adjustment to a new school, to increased responsibilities at home.

They also have the challenge of making new friends in a new place. That's not a problem in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

At Club TIGER, military kids can make friends and be part of the group. The Club TIGER after-school program provides an excellent opportunity for students to socialize, engage and learn.

For 75 years, Fort Leonard Wood has been a thriving Army installation. Located in the Ozark Mountains, the FLW installation is the sixth-largest employer in the state.

Numerous organizations connect the installation to the wider community. One of those programs is Club TIGER, which is provided by the Waynesville R-VI School District and staffed by AmeriCorps/VISTA members.

Club TIGER offers tutoring, homework assistance, arts and craft projects, physical fitness, and other fun activities to spark students' curiosity and engage them in exciting learning experiences. Seventy-five percent of students in the school district are considered military-connected.

"It's a low-cost, safe, fun, academically engaging environment for the students," said Erin Kaberline, who works with Sustainable Ozarks Partnership. Kaberline's two daughters have participated in the program.

Club TIGER's staff understands the special challenges military children face, and they help kids just be kids.

"A lot of military children face the same kind of challenges. They move around a lot; they're new to the school district," says Kaberline. "They're able to make those personal connections with either the adult volunteers or with other students that really help them to feel bonded to the community. It provides a great opportunity for kids to come in, meet people, and get involved immediately."

Having a space where her daughter can connect with other children socially is important to Beth Bellerby, an executive assistant at the Military Police Regimental Association. Bellerby's daughter, a rising fourth-grader, has been with Club TIGER since kindergarten.

As a parent, Bellerby appreciates the program's focus on parental engagement. Parents can come and participate in the hands-on activities, and Bellerby has done anything from making art to making mud pies. "I definitely enjoy spending time with my daughter but also watching her do different activities," Bellerby said.

Best of all, she has enjoyed watching how her daughter has grown. "I've seen her grow as a young lady in the way that she talks. She's very clear about things," added Bellerby.

The program's goal is to help students also grow academically. Club TIGER strives to have all students reach high standards, and at minimum attain proficiency in reading, language arts and math. They also want to increase parental involvement in literacy activities at home.

In addition to creating connections between kids, Club TIGER connects kids to the larger community. Last year, the younger Tigers made blankets for the homeless; middle school kids helped out in the community garden; and high schoolers developed their own community projects.

Having a chance to give back to the community helps kids feel more connected to it, and that's better for everyone.

"One of the key parts of building a resilient child is to make sure they feel like they're able to make the world a better place," said Kaberline. — WS
