

Army to troops: 'Avoid Marrying a Jerk'

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- They are the Pentagon's new "rules of engagement" - the diamond ring kind. U.S. Army chaplains are trying to teach troops how to pick the right spouse, through a program called "How To Avoid Marrying a Jerk."



The matchmaking advice comes as military family life is being stressed by two tough wars. Defense Department records show more than 56,000 in the Army - active, National Guard and Reserve - have divorced since the campaign in Afghanistan started in 2001.

Officials partly blame long and repeated deployments which started after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and stretched the service thin.

Troops also are coming home with life-altering injuries.

Many come back better people, others worse-off - but either way, very changed from who they were when they wed.

"Being in the military certainly raises the stakes when you choose a mate," said Lt. Col. Peter Frederich, head of family issues in the Pentagon's chaplain office.

The "no jerks" program is also called "P.I.C.K. a Partner," for Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge.

It advises the marriage-bound to study a partner's F.A.C.E.S. - family background, attitudes, compatibility, experiences in previous relationships and skills they'd bring to the union.

It teaches the lovestruck to pace themselves with a R.A.M. chart - the Relationship Attachment Model - which basically says don't let your sexual involvement exceed your level of commitment or level of knowledge about the other person.

Maj. John Kegley, a chaplain who teaches the program in Monterey, Calif., throws in the "no jerk salute" for fun. One hand at the heart, two-fingers at the brow mean use your heart and brain when choosing. Though the acronyms and salute make it sound like something the Pentagon would come up with, the

program was created by former minister John Van Epp of Ohio, who has a doctorate in psychology and a private counseling practice. He teaches it to Army chaplains, who in turn teach it to troops.

It also is used by social service agencies, prisons, churches and other civilian groups.

Commanders once discouraged troops from starting a family while serving. Thus the old saying: "If the Army wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one."

Today, the military supports families more than any other employer, Frederich said.

The Bush administration proposes to spend \$5.6 billion in the next budget year for quality-of-life services for troops and their families.

That includes help with child care, education, spouse job hunting, legal assistance, commissaries, relocation counseling - programs on every family issue imaginable - to promote stability, and thus troop readiness.

Such support notwithstanding, "not everybody is cut out" to marry into the military, said Army spokeswoman Martha Rudd.

Some 740,000 people - or a little more than half of all troops in the active-duty armed forces - are married. Of those, some 96,000 had spouses also in uniform in the 2004 budget year, according to Pentagon figures.

The Army hopes the "no jerks" program will help couples decide if they are ready for a long-term commitment and can cope with the unique stresses of military life.

"Settings like military bases are incubators," said Van Epp, of Medina, Ohio. "They try to hatch ... relationships extremely fast," leading to higher divorce rates and more domestic violence.

The program teaches troops not to cave in to the pressure of a ticking clock - like rushing to marry before shipping out for a deployment, or too soon after homecoming.

Last month, Van Epp sent 200 program workbooks to troops in Iraq.

On the Net:

Family support programs: <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

P.I.C.K a Partner <http://www.nojerks.com>

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