

Dealing with Deployment

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF DEPLOYMENT ON CHILDREN

The deployment of a parent can be a very emotional and stressful time for families.

Children may find it very difficult to adjust to the absence of a parent who is called to duty. Some children may not understand why a parent has to leave, while others may be afraid for their parent's safety. Some children may even be angry with a parent for leaving.

Children may cope differently with the stress of deployment. Some children may react by trying to bend the rules when one parent is away, while others may have trouble sleeping or feel lonely. Children who are sensitive or who have experienced previous social or emotional problems are at increased risk for more serious reactions to the stress of deployment. Pay attention to the child's behavior and look for any changes that may indicate he needs some help coping.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests these steps to help families work through the stress of a deployment:

- 1) Educate yourself before deployment. Be prepared for the range of feelings and emotions each family member could expect to feel. Know the resources available to help military families during times of separation. Identify your circle of support.
- 2) Share and listen. One of the most important things you can do to help alleviate some of your child's deployment-related stress is to talk about it with them—and listen. Answer your child's questions in a straightforward and age-appropriate way.
- 3) Monitor what your kids see. When a parent is deployed in response to a disaster or specific event, children may hear or see about it in the news or at school. It is best to share basic, factual information with children and avoid unnecessary details about tragic circumstances. Try to limit exposure to repetitive graphic images and sounds that may appear on television, radio, social media, etc.
- 4) Maintain closeness. Although the deployed parent is far away, he or she can remain close in the child's heart. A stuffed animal from mom or a t-shirt with dad's photo on it can help the child feel closer to her deployed parent. The family can also hang a map showing the deployed parent's location, send e-mails and care packages, or keep a journal to share when the deployed parent returns.
- 5) Stick to your routine. Children thrive on routines. Your family is already experiencing a huge change with the absence of a parent. Changing or ceasing normal routines may increase your child's stress levels.
- 6) Know when to call for help. If you or your child have extreme feelings of anxiety or exhibit excessive or prolonged behavior changes in response to a parent's absence, it is time to seek help from a medical or mental health professional. Deployments are stressful for everyone, and getting the help that's needed will benefit the entire family. Although it may seem the child's stress should disappear when the deployed parent returns home, it may actually increase if the parent returns with physical or mental health issues. A child may also be reluctant to get too close to the parent to avoid the pain of saying goodbye again. If you notice your child's stress remains or increases after a deployed parent returns, individual counseling and/or family counseling may help.



A child's ability to cope with the stress of deployment will depend on her age, developmental stage and personality. If your child displays these symptoms, he may need help coping with the stress:

- Babies: Feeding and/or sleeping difficulties, increased irritability, low energy
- Toddlers and Preschoolers: Aggressiveness, clinginess, changes in eating or sleeping habits, crying more often
- Elementary age: Regression (reverting back to baby talk or bedwetting), changes in eating or sleeping patterns, physical complaints like stomachaches or headaches
- Adolescents: Anger, moodiness, loss of interest in normal activities, risky behavior