

DEALING WITH DEPLOYMENT



Understanding the Impact of Deployment on Children

The deployment of a family member can be a very emotional and stressful time for families. Children’s reactions to deployment will vary depending on their age, gender, developmental stage and personality type. Children who are sensitive, or who have had previous social or emotional problems, are at increased risk for more serious reactions to the stress of deployment.

Age of Child

Typical Symptoms of Stress

Infants (*birth to 1 year*)

May have decreased appetite and increased irritability.

Toddlers and Preschoolers (*1–6 years*)

May appear more gloomy or tearful, have trouble sleeping, throw more frequent temper tantrums, return to behaviors they had outgrown such as bed wetting and thumb sucking, experience separation anxiety and engage in war-related play.

School Age Children (*6–12 years*)

May be more irritable, aggressive, whiny, fearful or withdrawn; have changes in eating, sleeping and activity patterns; show unusual fascination with war, death and weapons; complain of frequent stomach-aches or headaches or have more trouble at school.

Teenagers (*13–18*)

May be rebellious, irritable and more easily frustrated, want to spend more time with friends, suffer from low self-esteem, loose interest in sports and other hobbies, or engage in risky behavior like sex, drugs, or juvenile crime.

NOTE: *If children show signs of extreme stress, or if any symptoms last for more than six weeks, seek professional help from school, community or military service providers.*

Tips for Helping Children Deal with Deployment in Healthy Ways

Pre-Deployment

LEARN all you can about the deployment and what options are available for children to communicate with the deployed family member (mail, email, phone calls, video chats, etc.)

SHARE factual information with children in a calm and reassuring manner. Use terms they can understand.

INVOLVE preschoolers and school-age children in the preparation process. When children understand their new roles and can take part in making changes, they feel more in control of the situation and less stressed.

REASSURE children that the deployed family members are trained to do the important job they are going away to do and that they look forward to returning home after their mission. Let them know they are loved and that someone will always be there to take care of them. >>

LISTEN to children's questions and allow them to share their feelings, needs and fears. Young children see the world in very simple ways. Your answers to their questions about war should also be simple.

ESTABLISH a support system for yourself where you can express adult concerns and worries related to deployment and get the support you need to care for your family. Children are not equipped to provide the support parents and caregivers need.

INFORM teachers, coaches and other caregivers of the deployment so they can be on the lookout for changes in children's behavior that may indicate the need for additional help.

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Activities that Help Kids Cope:
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- Take pictures of the deploying family member doing everyday things and create a scrapbook the children can look at whenever they want.
- Record the deploying family member reading a chapter book so children can listen to his or her voice every day.
- Display the family member's picture in each child's bedroom so they feel close.

During Deployment

MAINTAIN the daily routine and normal rules of the home to provide consistency for children.

LIMIT children's exposure to the news and to adult conversations about frightening details.

EXPECT some temporary slow down or disruption in doing chores and homework. Patience, understanding and extra help may be needed during this time.

UNDERSTAND that feelings of loss, anger, grief or guilt are normal reactions to separation. Some children may act out or express themselves inappropriately at times as a way of coping with overwhelming feelings of fear, anxiety and confusion.

ENCOURAGE younger children to talk about how they are feeling or to express their emotions by painting or drawing. Older children and teenagers may prefer to express their thoughts and feelings in a private diary or journal.

SET personal goals for the deployment period or take up a new hobby or activity; these are some healthy ways to manage stress and cope with feelings of anxiety and fear.

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Activities that Help Kids Cope:
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- Create a scrapbook of daily happenings to share with the deployed family members upon their return home.
- Send children's paintings or drawings, cards and letters to deployed family members.
- Read letters and emails from deployed family members aloud around the dinner table.



HERE'S HELP

Use the **Family Resources on**

pages 91–95 to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.

Post Deployment

GIVE yourself and your family time to adjust and reconnect. It usually takes four to six weeks to adapt after a family member returns from deployment.

UNDERSTAND that things have changed. Family members have grown physically, emotionally and socially during deployment.

OBSERVE your family's new schedule and routines and try things the new way before suggesting changes.

DISCUSS your feelings, thoughts and concerns, but try not to criticize.

SET aside some time to spend with each child, one-on-one, doing activities that are special to them. This makes children feel special and appreciated for their individuality and allows family members to reconnect with each child in a way that is most comfortable for that particular child.

TAKE it easy with the children in terms of discipline. For a while, stick with the rules established during your absence.

MANAGE post-deployment stress with exercise, counseling and other healthy outlets to ensure you don't take your frustrations out on your family members.

SEEK help to deal with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, depression, or other serious concerns including personal financial crisis, substance abuse or marital problems.

===== *Tips for Reconnecting with Children:* =====

As with deployment, children will respond to reunions differently depending on their age, gender, developmental stage and personality type. The following techniques will help you reconnect with children at each developmental stage.

Infants

- STAY nearby while your family members feed, dress and play with infants so they get used to having you around.
- SPEAK to infants softly and often so they can get used to your voice.
- TAKE an active role in caring for infants as soon as possible.

Preschoolers

- SIT or kneel at their level.
- ASK about their new interests.
- LISTEN to what they tell you.

School Age Children

- ALLOW them to brag about you.
- REVIEW their school work, pictures, scrapbooks, etc.
- PRAISE them for their accomplishments during your deployment.

Teenagers

- LISTEN with undivided attention.
- RESPECT their privacy and friends.
- ENCOURAGE them to share what has happened during deployment.



This tip sheet was developed with information from the following online resources:

*www.uswestaap.org/Parent_Guide_Deployment.pdf; www.usuhs.mil/psy/pdf/CTChildrenCopeDuringDeployment.pdf;
www.MilitaryOneSource.com; www.realwarriors.net/family/children/reconnecting.php*