



Helping Children Cope With a Parent's Deployment

Preparing Children for Separation, Recognizing Emotional Distress, and Building Family Resilience

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When Mom or Dad Has to Leave

Few sacrifices of military service are more heartbreaking than leaving your children behind for months at a time. Birthdays, school activities, holidays, and ordinary family moments pass without the deployed parent, and that lost time can never be recovered. For the children, the departure of Mom or Dad may be even more difficult to understand.

Children depend on their parents for security, reassurance, and continuity of routine. When one parent suddenly disappears from everyday family life, their familiar world changes. They may wonder whether the absent parent will return, whether the remaining parent can manage alone, or whether something they did caused the separation.

Military parents cannot eliminate every difficulty associated with deployment, but they can help children prepare for it, understand their feelings, and maintain a strong connection with the parent who is away.

How Children of Different Ages React

A child's response to deployment depends partly on age, personality, previous experience, and the emotional atmosphere at home.

Babies and toddlers may not understand where a parent has gone, but they can notice the absence of a familiar caregiver and changes in household routines. Some become unusually clingy, irritable, or difficult to settle. When the deployed parent returns, a very young child may initially seem shy or reluctant to accept affection. This does not mean the relationship has been permanently damaged. With patience, familiar routines, and gentle attention, the bond can be renewed.

Preschool and elementary-school children often have difficulty understanding time and distance. Six months can seem like forever to a five-year-old. Younger children may worry that the departing parent is leaving because of something they did, while older children may become angry or resentful about the separation.

Teenagers generally understand the reasons for deployment but may struggle with the additional responsibilities placed upon them. Some become remarkably independent and helpful, while others withdraw, challenge household rules, or resent having to assume adult responsibilities before they feel ready.

No two children respond exactly alike. Parents should avoid assuming that a quiet child is coping well or that an angry child is simply misbehaving.

Tell the Truth and Offer Reassurance

Children are remarkably sensitive to changes in their parents' behavior. They notice whispered conversations, hurried preparations, and the anxiety that often accompanies an approaching deployment. Trying to conceal the impending separation may leave them imagining circumstances more frightening than the truth.

Once deployment plans are sufficiently definite, explain what will happen in language appropriate to each child's age. Tell them where the parent is going, approximately how long the separation may last, and what arrangements will be made at home. Avoid promises about exact return dates or communication schedules that military requirements may prevent you from keeping.

Most importantly, reassure children that they are loved and that the deployment is not their fault. Explain that military service sometimes requires parents to work far from home, but it does not change their love for their families.

Encourage children to discuss their feelings, including sadness, fear, frustration, and anger. Parents can acknowledge their own emotions without overwhelming children with adult worries. Saying, "I'm going to miss Dad, too, but we'll help each other while he's away," offers both honesty and reassurance.

Make Deployment a Family Project

One way to reduce uncertainty is to involve children in preparations for departure. Show them a map of the world and explain, within appropriate security limits, where the deployed parent will be serving. Learning about another country, its geography, and its people can turn an unfamiliar assignment into an educational experience.

If circumstances permit, take children to see the parent's workplace before departure. A visit aboard a ship or to a military installation can help them imagine where Mom or Dad will be working. Such visits must, of course, comply with installation rules and operational security requirements.

Let children help with appropriate packing preparations. A drawing, family photograph, or small keepsake tucked into a sea bag can provide a comforting connection. The departing parent might leave a recorded bedtime story, a handwritten note for a special occasion, or a photograph for the child's bedroom.

Younger children may enjoy marking time with a calendar or paper chain, while older children can participate in a shared reading project or maintain a journal to discuss when the parent returns.

These activities give children something constructive to do rather than simply waiting for the departure they dread.

Maintain Contact During Separation

Modern communication has made deployment easier for many military families, although access to telephones, email, and video calls depends upon the assignment and operational circumstances.

Encourage children to send drawings, letters, photographs, and accounts of everyday activities. Even ordinary events—a good report card, a lost tooth, or a school project—help the deployed parent remain involved in family life.

When possible, arrange regular communication without making promises that cannot be guaranteed. Children should understand that missed calls or delayed messages do not mean the absent parent has forgotten them.

Occasional letters, postcards, or small souvenirs from overseas can be particularly exciting for younger children. A package from a distant country may become the centerpiece of a classroom show-and-tell presentation. The objective is not constant communication, which may be impossible, but a continuing sense of family connection.

When One Parent Becomes the Only Parent at Home

Deployment also changes the family's structure of authority. The parent remaining at home assumes responsibility for discipline, household decisions, school activities, and the countless everyday problems ordinarily shared by two adults.

Children quickly recognize this change. Some test boundaries, while others become unusually protective of the parent who remains. Maintaining consistent rules, familiar routines, and reasonable expectations helps preserve a sense of stability.

The returning parent may encounter difficulties as well. Children who have become accustomed to one parent's authority may resist suddenly having two people making decisions again. Parents should anticipate this adjustment and gradually reestablish shared responsibilities rather than expecting the household to return immediately to its previous arrangement.

Recognizing Signs of Emotional Distress

Some children experience more than ordinary sadness during deployment. Warning signs may include persistent stomachaches or headaches without an obvious physical cause, sleep disturbances, declining school performance, withdrawal from friends, unusual anger, or a loss of interest in favorite activities.

These reactions deserve attention rather than punishment or dismissal. Encourage conversation, maintain contact with teachers and caregivers, and consider professional assistance when difficulties persist or interfere with everyday functioning.

Military family support programs, school counselors, healthcare professionals, and [Military OneSource](#) can help families locate appropriate resources. Seeking assistance early may prevent manageable difficulties from becoming more serious problems.

The Strength of Military Children

Ask adults who grew up as military children about their experiences, and many will describe an unusual combination of hardships and opportunities. They remember missing parents, changing schools, and leaving friends behind, but they may also recall learning independence, adaptability, and the importance of family relationships.

For a broader look at these experiences, see my article "**Growing Up a Military Brat**" in the **Military Family Life** section of this collection. It explores the distinctive challenges and opportunities of growing up in a military family, including frequent relocations, changing friendships, and the resilience that many military children develop along the way.

Those qualities are not guaranteed by military life. They develop through the encouragement, stability, and understanding provided by parents and the larger military community.

Military children make sacrifices they did not volunteer to undertake. They deserve recognition for the courage and patience required of them, particularly during long separations from a parent.

Perhaps the most important lesson parents can teach them is that **deployment changes where a family lives and works, but it need not diminish the love and commitment that hold the family together.**

And when the long-awaited homecoming finally arrives, the greatest reward may be something wonderfully ordinary: having Mom or Dad home for dinner again.