

Tips for Parents: Supporting the Child Whose Military Parent is Deploying

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Talk as a family before deployment. Before a deployment, military members are usually preoccupied with many preparatory activities at their military unit, requiring extended hours and increased workload. As a result, military members come home tired, perhaps late, and are already reluctant to address painful issues of impending separation. Family members frequently collude in this. It is important to overcome this resistance and make plans with the family as far ahead as possible.

Bestow, rather than “dump”, responsibilities on remaining family members. Concerns expressed by children after a parent has been deployed are that everything has changed at home and they now have to do “everything” that the deployed parent used to do. Discussions before deployment, in which trust and faith in a child’s ability to carry out a responsibility are expressed, are valuable times to help a child to feel he/she is important to the family, is important to the deployed parent, and that he/she can help share a potential burden with the remaining parent. As a result, the remaining parent will have more time and energy for the children.

Make plans for the family to continue to progress together, and include the deployed parent in ongoing projects. It is important that the family not put “life on hold” in anticipation of the return of the deployed parent. This will result in stagnation, loss of direction, and burn-out. Make plans for specific goals to be reached by each of the children and the remaining parent, as well as family projects to work on. Help children design ways to communicate with the deployed parent, and relate progress made, so that the deployed parent can be part of that progress by seeing pictures, report cards, to which he/she can respond and provide encouragement. Make sure the remaining parent and deployed parent have specific plans on how to communicate. Keep regular but not too frequent communication. Include the deployed parent informed and involved, but do not discuss problems and issues that he/she cannot do anything about.

Continue family traditions and develop new ones. One very stabilizing factor in a family is routine and tradition. Don’t stop Friday pizza night, or Saturday outings because the parent has deployed. If anything, become more predictable in continuing traditions. Family bowling night, attendance at and fellowship at places of worship, and involvement in events with other families are important ways to maintain a sense of stability and continuity. If the family has

not previously had regular family traditions, now is a good time to start them. Encourage children to talk about these events and activities to the deployed parent in their communication.

Help children understand the finite nature of a deployment by devising developmentally appropriate timelines. Although the parents may not always know the exact time that the deployment will take place, it is still helpful to make an estimate, and then help a child craft a calendar of some type, illustrated and punctuated with events which help to define time for them. Examples to include are holidays, birthdays, special family and extended family events, school events, vacations, and other “markers” which help to divide up the time of deployment absence into short and finite time episodes. Create a paper timeline with dates, which extends around a room, which can be illustrated by the child, or make a chain made of illustrated paper links, which are dated and illustrated. These links can be cut ceremoniously on a daily basis.

To children, no news is worse than bad news. Studies with children of deployed parents reveal that the children’s main preoccupation from day to day is not over the absent parent, but with the remaining parent. At some level, children are concerned about what is going on with the remaining parent. If that parent becomes short, cross, self-absorbed, tearful, with no explanation, the child’s fantasies about that parent’s ability to function are worse than what the reality is. Thus, the remaining parent should be relatively open about sharing concerns and news about the deployed parent. If the child has an explanation as to why the parent is irritable, tearful, or preoccupied, it is much easier to accept. Parents should not use their children as surrogate adults and load all of their concerns on the child, but should use judgment in sharing enough to ease the child’s worries.

Listen to a child’s worries about the deployed parent and answer questions as truthfully as possible. Follow up a child’s questions with further questions as to what prompted them to bring up an issue. Listen carefully first, before trying to dispel what you consider to be false notions on the part of the child. Explore as far as possible a child’s question and concern to show that you are trying to understand what he/she is worried about. Don’t keep pursuing the issue after a child appears to be satisfied. Be reassuring about protective measures and training designed to protect the deployed parent, but do not make false assurances about not getting hurt or not dying.

Maintain firm routine and discipline in the home. Under the best of circumstances, maintaining order and routine for children in the home is difficult. It is even more difficult when a parent is suddenly absent. The child will manifest anxiety about this new separation, and the concerns over the ability of the remaining parent to function, by testing the resolve of the remaining parent, testing rules, and flouting routines. With the increase in responsibilities, numbers of tasks and new stresses, it will be tempting not to pursue and enforce limits.

Only later does it become evident that the stress level increases quickly, when it is too late. Be proactive and discuss with the child your intent to have very firm routines related to bedtimes, morning routines, room clean-up, chore accountability, and homework. Then follow through with a clear and predictable set of consequences and rewards to keep the program going.

Initiate and maintain a close relationship with the school and the child's teacher. Have a conference with the significant figures in the child's schooling, depending on the child's level. This may only involve the child's classroom teacher for the young child, or others, such as several teachers, counselor, or principal for the older child or special needs child. Make clear to them that the child's parent has been deployed and that there may be an increase in stress at home. Anticipate the first signs of stress in the child. Signs of vulnerability and stress are deteriorating academic performance, behavioral problems in the classroom, problems in peer relationships, unexplained mood changes, tearfulness or irritability, or worsening of previously existing behavioral problems. Have a plan devised with the school authorities for constructive and helpful interventions to support the child and redirect him/her to previous levels of successful function. Be ready to have further conferences if necessary. Be proactive and take the lead.

As the remaining parent, make sure you take care of yourself. If one is interested in the well-being of a child, the dictum is always, "Take care of the caretaker." Unfortunately, because of the many demands upon the remaining parent, it is difficult to make this happen. Taking care of oneself must be seen as a necessity and given high priority in planning. Frequently, the remaining parent is basically a working single parent. However, sit and plan a schedule, and include the child in the planning if it is appropriate. Let your child know that you will be much better able to take care of him/her, that you will be much more fun to be with, and have more energy if you can take time to get out and exercise, take a scheduled nap, have alone time, or take time with a good supportive friend. The time periods can be short, but should be planned, so that you are not feeling guilty. Express appreciation to your child when you take the time for yourself, and let him/her know how much better you feel.