



## When a Family Member is Deployed for Military Service: *Childrens' Issues*

Parents can help children understand and accept the separation.

### Pre-Family Separation

The pre-family separation period is stressful for parents and children. Confronted with an extended absence of a parent, family members sense a loss of continuity and security. Children may not fully understand why one of their parents must leave. Very often young children may become confused and fearful that Mommy or Daddy will desert them.

Children are not very good at expressing fears and feelings in words. Anger and a desire for revenge, as well as guilt for feeling that way, are often demonstrated in the child's behavior. Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. When changes occur, children usually have no other way to release anxieties, and no where to go for help. At a time when the spouse readies to deploy, the remaining spouse may feel overwhelmed, as he or she prepares to solely support the children, home and car.

What can be done about relieving the stress of the pre-family separation period? Think about the following ideas which have been helpful to others in similar situations:

### Talk To Your Children About The Deployment Before It Happens

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give the child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left in the dark. Knowing about the deployment in advance helps in adjusting to the idea.

### Building An Emotional Bond

The departing parent needs to spend some QUALITY time with each child before they leave. Don't be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is powerful communication.

Use this time to share pride in your work, the military, and the purpose for your deployment. Children of school age are beginning to understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier to let go if Mom or Dad's job is seen as essential to the mission of the military.

Often when asked if something is bothering them, a child will say "no." But there are ways to get through. Make some casual reference to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending assignment or deployment. This helps a child realize their parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it models an appropriate way to release feelings--talk about them.

## Visit Your Child's Teacher

Frequently children react to the deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their studies. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging.

## Plan For Communicating

Expect children to stay in touch with the departed spouse. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing.

## Help Children To Plan For The Departure

While the spouse is packing their bags, allow the children to assist in some way. Suggest a "swap" of some token, something of the child's that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to the departing spouse.

Discuss the household chores and let the children choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Mother and father need to agree with each other that division of household chores is reasonable. The role of disciplinarian needs to be supported by the departing member.

## Being A Long Distance Parent

Parenting while away from home is not easy. The most important aspect of parenting from a distance is making those small efforts to stay in touch. Doing something to say the parent is thinking about and missing the child is what is most important. Here are some practical suggestions to help keep the absentee parent involved with their children:

Letters and cards from mom or dad are important. The length and contents are not nearly as important as the presence of something in the mail from the absent parent. When sending picture post cards, make little notes about the place or write that you stood right here "x" in the picture. Any small thing which makes the card personal will have tremendous meaning to children at home.

When using a tape recorder, remember to be creative: sing "Happy Birthday," tell a story, read scripture, take it with you on your job or when visiting with other members of your unit. Don't try to fill a tape completely in one sitting. Make sure you describe the surroundings, the time of day, and what you are doing, etc.

Try not to forget birthdays and special holidays which would be important to a child, particularly Thanksgiving, religious holidays, Halloween, or Valentine's Day.

Try to schedule phone calls when children are likely to be at home. Keep a mental list of things you want to talk about with each child, such as their friends, school, ball games, etc. Ask each child to send you something from the activities they are involved in at school, home or outside activities like dance lessons, youth groups or scouts.

If your child has a pet, make sure to ask about it. TURN ON YOUR SENSORS AND TUNE IN TO YOUR CHILD'S WORRIES ABOUT THE DEPLOYMENT

Just because a child doesn't tell you about their concerns doesn't mean that they are not troubled. Children don't usually recognize the cause, nor will they tell you they are concerned. The spouse that is departing should communicate with each child individually. There is no substitute for a letter with your own name on the envelope. Send postcards, snapshots, and tape recordings of the sounds around you where you are deployed. Let them know you are thinking of and loving them. YOU AND YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS CAN TALK MORE ABOUT THESE OR OTHER ISSUES CONFIDENTIALLY WITH AN EAP COUNSELOR.

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healthy bodies  
sound minds  
a safe place to work



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This material is adapted from the "Predeployment Guide: A Tool for Coping" on the Air Force Crossroads website at <http://www.afcrossroads.com/famseparation>