



Information for Deployed and At-Home Parents

Children’s Responses to Deployment

The way children react to being separated from a parent during deployment varies depending on their age, personality, experiences, physical and emotional health, and their personal relationship with both parents. Everyone reacts to a deployment in their own, unique way; even siblings living in the same household will have individual reactions to a parent’s deployment. It’s common for children with a deployed parent to seek reassurance that they’re still loved and that the at-home parent won’t “abandon” them. It’s important for both parents during a deployment to take extra steps to ensure that their children feel loved.

The following information isn’t true for every child. Please consider it a helpful guideline and remember that the needs of every child are unique and precious.

	AGE	BEHAVIORS	MOODS	WHAT YOU CAN DO: AT-HOME PARENT	WHAT YOU CAN DO: DEPLOYED PARENT
Infants	0-1	Won't eat, more fussy	Less energy or interest in things	More affection, see pediatrician	Support spouse, communicate
Toddlers	1-3	Tantrums, cries, acting out	Grumpy, angry, sad	More attention, hugs, affection	Send letters, photos, e-mails, show love
Preschool	3-6	Potty accidents, clingy, won't sleep	Sad, moody, frustrated	More attention, conversations, hugs	Send letters, photos, e-mails, show approval
School Age	6-12	Whines, “acts out” for attention	Grumpy, moody, sad	More attention, maintain routines, conversations	Send letters, photos, e-mails, show interest
Teenagers	12-18	Isolates, turns to peers, takes risks	Anger, depression or gives the sense that they don't care	Patience, limit-setting, conversations	Send letters, photos, e-mails, stay involved

Infants (0-1 year) must be held and actively nurtured in order to thrive. If the at-home parent becomes depressed during the Service Member’s deployment, then the infant may fuss a great deal, have less energy and interest in what’s going on around them, may refuse to eat and may even lose weight. If this happens it is extremely important that a pediatrician evaluate the baby right away. The at-home parent should also be sure to monitor their own self-care and seek support from others. They may need to seek professional care from a therapist or counselor if they are having difficulty adjusting or feel depressed.

What can the deployed parent do? It *is* possible for a service member, even during a deployment, to help care for an infant who is negatively affected by her or his absence. A great way to do this is to regularly communicate love, affection and support to the at-home parent through letters, e-mails, postcards, and photos. This can help the at-home parent, who may feel lonely and even depressed. In turn, the at-home parent will be able to bring renewed energy and affection to the care of the child or children.



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Toddlers (1-3 year olds) will generally copy the attitude and behaviors of the at-home parent. If the at-home parent is coping well, it's likely that the child will also do well. If the at-home parent is experiencing emotional difficulties, then toddlers may become gloomy, tearful, throw tantrums or develop sleep problems. Children usually respond positively to more attention, hugs, and holding hands. The at-home parent might benefit from sharing day-to-day experiences with other parents facing similar challenges. It's also very important for the at-home parent to balance self care with caring for children: Don't sacrifice one for the other, or both will suffer.

What can the deployed parent do? At this age the toddler can start identifying people in photos and understand that a person still exists even though they are not present. The deployed parent should communicate directly with the child through letters, e-mails, and postcards. Some of the deployed parent's letters can be read by the spouse much like a bedtime story. And through updated photos, the face of the deployed parent can be kept alive in the child's imagination.

Preschoolers (3-6 year olds) having negative reactions to a parent's deployment may act younger than they really are, have difficulty with potty training or bed wetting, start "baby talk," engage in thumb-sucking, refuse to sleep alone, and so forth. They may also seem more "clingy," irritable, depressed, or aggressive and have fears that the at-home parent or others will leave them. The at-home parent should reassure children with extra attention and physical closeness (hugs, holding hands). It's also important to avoid changing family routines, if possible, because children find comfort in familiar patterns. Answers to questions about the deployment should be brief, matter-of-fact and to the point. This will help counter the free-floating anxiety of a child's overactive imagination.



What can the deployed parent do? Younger preschoolers respond well to visual stimulation, so sending cards, photos, funny images, and colorful pictures may really cheer them up. Older preschoolers are learning to read, so it's a good idea to write short, simple notes so that they can practice reading — this will help them feel connected and proud of their abilities as well.



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School-Age Children (6-12 year olds) may whine, complain, become aggressive or "act out" their feelings. They may focus on the deployed parent missing a key event, saying, for example, "If Daddy really loved me he'd be here for my birthday." Some signs of difficulty adjusting may include: sleep problems, loss of interest in school, not eating or eating too much, and not playing with friends. School age kids should be encouraged to talk about their feelings with the at-home parent, and will need more attention (hugs, joint activities, help with homework) than usual. It's best to stick to family routines as much as possible since this helps the child feel more safe and secure. Keeping school-age children involved in extracurricular activities is also a good idea.

What can the deployed parent do? This is an especially important time to make a big deal out of birthdays and other important events, like a child's good grades or sports activities. Buy birthday presents, cards, and other little gifts **before** deploying. This way, the child will be able to open something already picked out and wrapped by their absent parent, which helps them feel special. Writing detailed letters directly to the older school-aged child will also help them feel important and connected to you.



Teenagers (12-18 year olds) may be irritable and rebellious and may fight or participate in other attention-getting behavior. They may show a lack of interest in school, peers, and activities. They are also at greater risk for unsafe sex, and alcohol and drug use. Although they may deny problems and worries, it is extremely important for the at-home parent to stay involved and be available to talk about the teenager's concerns. If the teenager's grades suffer, some patience and help is a good idea, as well as establishing rules and expectations for motivation. Sports and social activities should also be encouraged to give normal structure to their life. Also, more responsibility in family routines will help them feel important and needed.

What can the deployed parent do? With teenagers, it's important to strike a balance between loving support and discipline. E-mails and letters make it possible for the deployed parent to show they understand the teenager's frustration brought about by the deployment. Teenagers should be encouraged to write out their feelings in letters and e-mails to the deployed parent. It's also important to convey to your teenager your expectation that she or he be mature, helpful around the house, and supportive of the at-home parent during the deployment. Teens generally respond well to this balance between love and discipline.



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Getting Support

Deployment is a challenging time for even the healthiest of families. Having support from friends, family, other parents, and the community can make coping with this challenging time a little easier. The following support networks can be very helpful for parents and children of all ages:

- Family Readiness Groups or Rear Detachment Command.
- Family and friends.
- Playgroups.
- Religious/spiritual activities.
- Community gatherings.
- Army Community Services.
- Behavioral Health Services.