Courage to Care

A Health Promotion Campaign from
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Helping Children Cope During Deployment

This fact sheet contains useful information for you — parents and family caregivers — to help children cope during a parents' deployment. Experts in military medicine and family trauma who understand the impact of deployment on families have written this fact sheet. It is in the form of commonly asked questions followed by their responses. It is important to remember that while deployments are stressful, they also provide opportunities for families to grow closer and stronger.

The best way to help children cope is to 1) reassure them that the *deployed parent is trained* to do his/her job; 2) explain to children that *they, too, have a job* as part of the family at home who supports our troops and our nation; and, 3) communicate in ways that children can understand according to their age (see sidebar on page 2: *Communicating with Children during Deployment*).

Commonly Asked Questions from Parents About Deployment

Q. What is the best way to prepare children for deployment?

A. Parents must be honest, and focus on their children's safety, security and continuity of routine. If deployment will change the child's lifestyle such as moving, living with grandparents, or changing childcare, school or community activities, the child needs to hear of these things in advance.

Q. How else can we reassure our children about a deployment?

A. First, parents should digest the information *before* they communicate it to children so they can deliver it in a calm and reassuring manner. Second, children worry about the *safety* of the deployed parent. It is important to let children know that the deployed parent is *trained* to do their job. Third, it is important to communicate in a way that your child will understand based on their age.

Q. How do children signal their distress?

A. Stress affects children like it does adults. Children may complain of headaches, stomach distress and sleep disturbances. They may display moodiness, irritability, low energy, and have more dramatic reactions to minor situations such as stubbing a toe. It can be difficult sometimes to sort out normal distress and more serious problems. If in doubt, seek medical advice.

Q. Are there ways to reduce stress on children during the separation?

A. Yes, one very positive way is emphasize to your children that they have a job that is as REAL as that of the deployed parent. Stress is often the result of feeling helpless or unsure or unclear about a new role or situation. It is important to reinforce that doing well in school, helping out at home and being cooperative is a skill set that is part of *their* job, one that is valued and unique to their being a military child. When children do their job they help support their parent's mission.

Q. How should school problems be handled?

A. If there is concern about a child's behavior at home, parents should notify the school. Many parents may be reluctant to call attention to their child by warning school officials, but it is important for the school to be alert to any unusual symptoms. If a child has had psychiatric issues before the deployment they are more likely to have problems as a result of the deployment. It is important to talk to your child about any acting out, and get them to discuss their feelings and issues. Your child's school or your primary care doctor can arrange for counseling services.

General Tips for Communicating with Children of All Ages

- Be careful about sharing your emotions with children. Some parents share too much (losing control in front of kids) or share too little (no emotion or giving the

Continued on reverse side

General tips, continued

message that you can't talk about it). Children take their cues from you.

- Keep up the routine. Activities, such as games, schooling, bed times, are important to keep regular. Continue to celebrate birthdays or other special occasions with enthusiasm.
- Have your spouse before or while deploying record chapter books on a cassette recorder to be played back to young children. This helps with separation and attachment issues. Likewise, help your children create scrapbooks, video or journals to send or share upon return.
- Listen to your children and their concerns. Children may think a lot and have worries/concerns about their parents that are difficult to express. Be available when they are ready to communicate.
- Limit television and other media coverage of the war to help reduce anxiety and worries.
- *Take care of yourself*! Find time to rest, see a movie or do something just for you. Accept help from family or friends if feeling overwhelmed or in need of time out. We are all more vulnerable to stress when we are tired, and can manage better when we are rested and in tune with ourselves.
- Seek professional help from your military or civilian community in the event of special circumstances such as serious injury or death of loved ones. Help is available from people who are experienced in such matters and care.

Additional Resources

For information on talking with children about traumatic events, go to:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/DISASTER.HTM

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/TraumaticEvents/tips.asp

Communicating with Children about Deployment

Parents need to communicate with children in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Timing and what is being shared are important factors. At home parents also help their children communicate with the deployed parent in age appropriate ways. Here are some simple explanations of what children can grasp at certain ages.

Three to four year olds

No concept of time. A three year old thinks that three months is next week. Parents need to use markers, such as, "Dad or mom will be home right before your birthday or before this holiday."

Early elementary school

Better understanding of time. They understand that three months is a long time. Calendars are helpful. You can mark the calendar and say, "This is the day that Dad or mom is supposed to come home."

Seven and eight year olds

Understand time and bigger concepts. They will be able to look at calendar and mark it. You can say, "This is the day dad or mom is supposed to come home." This age group understands concepts like good and bad. You can say dad or mom is going away to take care of the bad guys or bad things.

Nine, ten, eleven and twelve year olds

Abstract thinking has begun. They are aware of the news and can understand concepts like the "national good." You can put out a return date, and they will understand the timeframe. Reinforce this age group's skills by providing them with pre-stamped envelopes, as well as private email accounts for communicating.

Older adolescents

Challenging age group. This is an emotional period of time under the best of circumstances. It is an age when children need to identify with their same sex parent. If that parent is deployed, it is especially difficult for the child.

Courage to Care is a health promotion campaign of Uniformed Services University. Its purpose is two-fold: to provide quality health information reflecting our University's excellence in military medicine and to present it in a friendly, appealing format for immediate distribution for the health promotion needs in your community.

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