

Military Families

Families with members in the military face unique situations that can make parenting more challenging. Being separated from a loved one during deployment coupled with uncertainty about when they might return places unique stress on families and creates intense, often mixed feelings. It is important to recognize that these feelings are a normal response to these stressors.



The Deployment Cycle

- **Predeployment:** the time leading up to deployment is often strained by uncertainty about the future and a sense of urgency to get household tasks completed. It is common for arguments between couples to increase as the time to say “goodbye” approaches because of the underlying irritability and tension both are feeling. It can help, although it can be difficult, for couples to talk about what they expect of each other while they are apart.
- **Active deployment:** the time period between departure through the first month or so of deployment. It is often a time of emotional ups and downs.
- **Sustainment:** the time from active deployment until a month before the service member returns home. During this time, those left at home establish routines, build a support system, and begin to feel like they can manage things on their own. There is ongoing concern, however, for the wellbeing of the service member, especially if that person is in a combat zone.
- **Redeployment:** the month before the service person returns home. It is often filled with deep and mixed emotions.
- **Postdeployment:** begins when the service member returns home and lasts about three to six months. Often, a “honeymoon” period follows the return home. As time passes, parents are faced with having to readjust and renegotiate roles and responsibilities in the household.

Families who experience multiple deployments report the feeling of never getting back to where they began before another deployment happens again.



Clues that children may be having difficulty

- *Increased whining, crying and/or clinginess*
- *More frustration and difficulty calming down*
- *Increase in aggressive behavior*
- *Withdrawal, or decreased interest in activities and other people*
- *Changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns*
- *A return to behaviors from when a child was younger, such as thumb sucking, toileting accidents, or waking at night*
- *Greater fear of separation from familiar caregivers*

What Can Be Done?

- It is the little things said and done that make a difference for children. Spending special time with children, helping them name what they are feeling, accepting and validating their emotions, and keeping or establishing routines are all ways children can be supported.
- Caregivers can share a story about a time when someone they loved and trusted helped them through a stressful time, and then help children think of what would be helpful for them.
- Openly communicate and advocate for children. For example, a parent might say, “I’m leaving for Iraq next month. Can we talk about what this means for [child’s name] ?”
- Take time for self-care.



MORE INFORMATION



Supporting young children of military families

Content adapted from Dombro, A. (2007)

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