

FOR MILITARY PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

★ SUPPORTING YOUR CHILDREN THROUGHOUT DEPLOYMENT ★

★ MILITARY FAMILIES ARE RESILIENT ★

When a parent/caregiver is deployed or faces an increased operational tempo, especially to a combat zone, this can be one of the most significant stressors on your family. Although your children may exhibit behavioral and emotional changes, including worry about the safety of their deployed parent/caregiver (and even you), most military children will demonstrate remarkable resilience. There are several things you can do to mitigate the negative effects of deployment including maintaining your well-being, fostering positive family dynamics, and using effective parenting strategies.

★ MAINTAINING YOUR WELL-BEING ★

Your well-being as the at-home parent/caregiver is crucial in shaping how your children cope during transitions, such as deployment.



- ★ **Take some time for yourself to adjust to this transition.** Give yourself time to digest the news. This may mean having some private conversations with your spouse, partner, or other trusted adults in your life. Giving yourself this time to adjust will help you to share the news with your children in a calm, developmentally appropriate way.
- ★ **Get support for your additional needs.** Consider the additional resources you need to maintain your family routine and create a plan to obtain these resources. This may include childcare, financial support, or someone to speak to for your own support.
- ★ **Ensure you are attending to your own overall well-being.** Deployment can be hard on everyone. Your strong presence can greatly reduce the emotional strain caused by the deployed parent's absence. Consider ways you can maintain your overall physical health, mental health, relationships, work-life balance, and ways you want to support your community. Enhancing stress management strategies, integrating movement into your routine, practicing gratitude for those in your life, reminding yourself of your purpose, and showing kindness are all strategies to enhance your well-being.
- ★ **Understand and manage your own emotions.** Staying attuned to your mental health can help you know when you might need to adopt different coping strategies or need more support. This can include taking a slow breath in and reminding yourself you got this, to creating moments of joy for yourself and your children. It isn't uncommon for the at-home parent/caregiver to seek their own mental health support during these times.
- ★ **Maintain a routine.** Creating a new routine for yourself and being consistent with it can help you and your children.
- ★ **Remain optimistic.** As hard as it might be sometimes, try to focus on the positives and remind yourself that you and your family will get through this and other transitions. When you can remain optimistic that you and your family can handle this deployment together, it can be grounding for everyone.

★ CREATE A PLAN FOR WHEN A PARENT/CAREGIVER IS DEPLOYED ★

Early preparation and planning are key to maintaining your children's well-being throughout the deployment process. Prior to deployment, you can discuss as a family how you are going to handle this transition.

- ★ **Staying connected.** Discuss how and how often you will stay in contact with the deployed parent/caregiver.
- ★ **Openly talk about the deployment.** Discuss openly what you know about the deployment. Acknowledge that this will be difficult for everyone and describe how you will be there to support them. For families with multiple deployments, discuss how this news might remind them of previous experiences.
- ★ **Discuss any major adjustments.** Some families need to move, have children change schools, or have other loved ones live with them while the parent/caregiver is deployed. Discuss with your children these plans, answer their questions, and acknowledge that these changes are challenging.
- ★ **Create a new routine.** Create a new calendar and walk through with your children what their new daily routine will look like. Specifically, discuss if they will be participating in any new activities (after school program or other school activities), if others will be involved with their care (babysitter, another family member moving in), and what you will be doing together to maintain family time.
- ★ **Provide reassurance.** Children often worry about the safety of their parents. Remind them that the deployed parent/caregiver is trained and is highly skilled for this job. Also remind them that you and others will be there to support them. This is a good time to remind them of everyone that cares for them.



To assist families in creating this plan, many installations offer FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress) resilience training to help families prepare for deployment and create a communication plan; knowing where to turn for support ahead of time ensures parents/caregivers can act quickly if needed. FOCUS is also offered virtually for active duty military families who live a distance from these installments. For more details, go to www.focusproject.org. Finally, families can visit FOCUS World (www.focusworld.org) which is an interactive online educational tool that helps military families to learn and practice these key skills to foster family resilience in a fun way.

★ OTHER RESOURCES TO PREPARE FOR DEPLOYMENT ★

Military OneSource/DHA: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/deployment/pre-deployment/>
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/resources/millife-guides/strengthen-family-bonds/>

Tricare: <https://www.tricare.mil/LifeEvents/Moving-When-Deploying>

For additional community resources - Blue Star Families: <https://bluestarfam.org/>

★ EFFECTIVE PARENTING PRACTICES DURING DEPLOYMENT ★

Several parenting practices can help increase resilience in military children during deployment:

- ★ **Maintain Routines.** Maintaining consistent daily routines provides stability and a sense of security for children, helping them cope with the disruptions throughout the deployment.
- ★ **Open Communication.** Encouraging children to express their feelings and discussing the deployment openly helps them process their emotions and feel supported. Consider talking about the high and low of everyone's day as part of your daily routine. This daily check in makes sure there is regular time to have these discussions.



- ★ **Maintaining Connection with the Deployed Parent.** Facilitating regular communication with the deployed parent, such as video calls or letters, helps the children feel connected and reassured, reducing feelings of loss. The children can also create daily videos/audios of their day, so the deployed parent doesn't have to miss out on those smaller moments in their children's life.
- ★ **Positive Discipline.** Using constructive discipline techniques, such as setting clear boundaries and reinforcing good behavior, helps children feel secure and understand expectations during a time of change.
- ★ **Emotional Regulation Modeling.** Parents who demonstrate healthy ways to manage their own stress and emotions can help children learn how to regulate their feelings effectively.

★ PARENTAL SENSITIVITY ★

Parental sensitivity refers to a parent's ability to recognize and respond appropriately to their children's emotional and behavioral needs. Parental sensitivity acts as a protective factor. Higher parental sensitivity is linked to better social-emotional outcomes for children, even amidst deployment stress. Examples include:

- ★ **Attentiveness.** Noticing when a child is feeling upset, anxious, or withdrawn and offering comfort or reassurance, rather than dismissing their distress.
- ★ **Emotional Attunement.** Understanding the child's emotional state and responding in a way that matches their needs, such as offering a hug when they're sad or giving space when they need it.
- ★ **Consistency.** Providing reliable, consistent responses, so the child knows they can count on their parent for support, whether it's listening to their concerns or helping them navigate a difficult situation.
- ★ **Supportive Problem-Solving.** Helping the child work through challenges by guiding them through problem-solving steps, instead of solving the problem for them or ignoring it.

★ RESILIENCE ENHANCING PRACTICES ★

There are several resilience enhancing practices that can help military children cope with deployment:

- ★ **Emotional Awareness and Mental Health Literacy.** Encouraging children to recognize and label their emotions can help them better understand their feelings. This reduces the risk of children feeling overwhelmed by anxiety or sadness during a parent/caregiver's deployment, and helps children gain the comfort to express difficult emotions and feelings with loved ones.
- ★ **Socializing.** When children go through change they may limit time with others. Encourage them to spend time with their friends, connect with other children whose parents are also deployed, or cultivate a new interest or hobby. You can also encourage children to connect with supportive adults at their school or after school programs, camps, sports teams, or spiritual settings, including teachers, coaches, or counselors. This helps create a sense of belonging and offers additional emotional outlets.
- ★ **Adaptability, Flexibility, and Positive Mindset.** Helping children embrace change by reinforcing that military life involves frequent relocations and adjustments can enhance their ability to cope with transitions and uncertainty. Discussing what to expect during a deployment (making a plan) and what is expected of them can be very helpful in developing a positive mindset.





★ **Self-Expression.** Encouraging children to express their feelings and to describe the narrative of their experiences through art (e.g., drawing or collage), keeping a journal, or rehearsing music or dance can provide a healthy way to manage emotions and reduce stress during deployment.

★ **Physical Activity.** Helping children get their bodies moving provides many physical and mental health benefits and stress relief. For many children, participation in sports can provide opportunities to build friendships and resilience, through structure, teamwork, and discipline.

For more parenting support, consider signing up for ADAPT (After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools) online, which is a free program that teaches parenting skills to help you and your family navigate through these challenges, while embracing and building on your family's values and goals. To learn more, go to www.adaptparenting.org.

★ WHEN ADDITIONAL HELP IS NEEDED ★

It is typical for children to experience worries, fears, or even anxiety and depression during a parent/caregiver's deployment. It is important to watch that these emotions do not become persistent, excessive, or cause disruptions in a child's social development or academic performance. If these emotional experiences become persistent or worsen, seeking support from a mental health professional, either on an installment or in the community, is essential. These interventions have been developed to address child trauma and enhance resiliency for military families and children:

TF-CBT

(Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy):

Therapy for military children addressing trauma from deployment, combat, or loss through cognitive behavioral and trauma-specific techniques.

AF-CBT (Alternatives for Families: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy):

Helps reduce conflict and aggression in military families by improving communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Know that after the deployment ends and reunification occurs, some of the same steps are needed to manage for this transition. Creating a plan for this exciting time, discussing the new routine, discussing what to expect, and creating an expectation that adjustments take time can help with the welcoming of a deployed parent/caregiver home.



OTHER RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOUR FAMILY DURING AND AFTER DEPLOYMENT

Military OneSource/DHA: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/deployment/on-deployment/>
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/resources/millife-guides/post-deployment-reintegration/>

USUHS/CDP: <https://www.cstsonline.org/fact-sheet-menu/military>

Sesame Street: <https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/>

NCTSN: www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/populations-at-risk/military-and-veteran-families

Cohen Veterans Network: <https://www.cohenveteransnetwork.org/>

MCEC: <https://militarychild.org/>

NMFA: <https://www.militaryfamily.org/info-resources/deployment/>

VA/NCPTSD Effects of PTSD on Families: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/family/effects_ptsd.asp

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