

# Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope with Separation



# Introduction



This guide was created for parents, relatives, teachers, service members, and community members to help children and youth cope with separation from a parent due to military deployment. Because children can be seriously affected by the absence of a parent or both parents, it is important for those adults closest to the child to be educated and informed about separations and deployment and how to help children adapt to these changes. This guide was written with children ages 7-18 in mind. For the child under the age of 3, please refer to the pamphlet entitled, "Little Listeners in an Uncertain World: Coping strategies for you and your child during deployment or when a crisis occurs," produced by ZERO TO THREE, or visit the Web site [www.zerotothree.org/coping](http://www.zerotothree.org/coping) for more information and links to resources.

Within the military setting, separations of service members from their families are the result of operations and, most

commonly, deployments. A deployment is defined as "the movement of an individual or military unit within the United States or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission." Although sometimes regarded as an event, a deployment is more accurately viewed in the context of a process.

Viewed this way, a deployment has three stages: a period before deployment, the period when a service member is deployed for military operations, and the reunion period, in which the deployed member returns home. For military families, each of these stages may evoke many different reactions, especially from children, and require certain adjustments. The aim of this guide is to explain deployment and its resulting disruptions to military family life, and to assist parents, teachers, service providers, and other adults with instructions and resources for helping children and youth cope during any stage of the deployment cycle.



Sometimes family members are deployed to high-threat or other dangerous locations. As evident in our nation's war against terrorism, deployments have been steadily increasing in frequency, length, and risk. For military families, uncertainties surrounding today's deployments are most stressful and trying.

This guide was written with the understanding that reactions and adjustments to the heightened risks associated with separations and deployments are not experienced uniformly across active and reserve components, military branches, service units, or deployment locales. Clearly, family experiences vary across situations and conditions. Children

and youth may or may not understand these distinctions. They may or may not understand the distinction between high-threat or low-threat deployments. But it is important that all adults—particularly those in the community who are directly linked to family separations by deployment—be knowledgeable about the deployment condition and able to respond openly and accurately to children's questions and concerns.

**The guide begins by providing general information on the effects of separation on children and youth between the ages of 7-18.** This section includes a description of the deployment cycle that is common to all components and Service Branches. Details will be explained so you can be better informed about what happens during a deployment and what children may experience as well.

**Next, the guide provides information specific to each of four audiences: parents (and other primary caregivers), teachers, service providers, and community members.** Each of these four sections offers audience-specific information, tips, and resources for helping children and youth cope with the separation from one or both parents.

**At the end of this guide you will find a list of references.**

Thank you for taking the time to read through this guide and the sections designed for you. Your knowledge and the experiences that you share with children about deployments lend crucial support to children in their time of need.



***... the discovery that no matter what you wish, who you ask, or what you do, you cannot escape the loss of separation.***

## **Separation of Child and Parent**

Remember the “peek-a-boo” game with infants and toddlers? The reaction of very young children during that game reminds us all that separation, starting with something as basic as disappearance from sight, has powerful effects on the very young. As children become older, the effects of even the briefest

of separations become more complex and more powerful. Separation from a loving caregiver produces anxiety in all humans. Learning as infants that our sounds of distress bring us comfort from our caretaker establishes the foundation for a basic trust. Those early experiences of trust allow all of us to cope with the separation experiences we encounter throughout childhood—the parent is not

# Understanding Separation

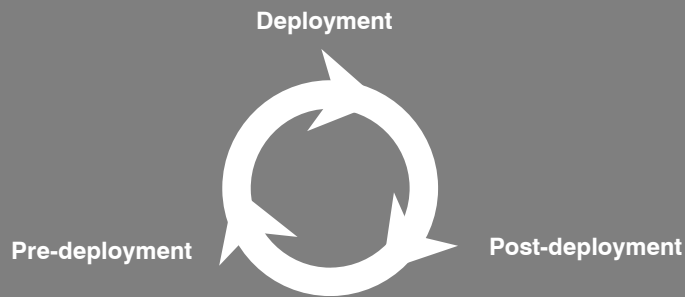
always around and available. By the age of 7 children begin to understand also that with separation there is sometimes the feelings of loss of control—the discovery that no matter what you wish, who you ask, or what you do, you cannot escape the loss of separation.

As children age, their world of separation and interaction with others expands. A single relocation to a new community results in a change in schools, teachers, friends, neighbors, and contact with relatives. For military families in the active component, and to a lesser extent for families in the reserve component, relocation to new communities through

Permanent Change of Stations (PCS) is a way of life. For today's military child, there are additional, periodic separations as parents serving in both active and reserve components undergo training exercises and deployments.

Most children perceive separation from a parent as stressful. But not all children perceive the event, or respond to the event, similarly. When you help children adjust to separation from a parent, remember that children of different ages and varying experiences with separation react to separation differently. These differences, as experienced by different ages, are discussed in the next section.

## Overview of the Cycle and Stages of Deployment



### The Cycle of Deployment

Today's deployments can be viewed as having three distinct stages: **pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment.** Providing information about what to expect, especially for families unfamiliar with a long-term separation, can greatly help coping and adjusting to the deployment experience.

Today's deployments are lengthy and unpredictable, with considerable

variation across Service Branches and components. The time periods given for these stages are estimates only.

**Pre-deployment.** (Several weeks to 1 year.) This stage begins with the order for deployment and ends when the service member departs from the home station. The pre-deployment time frame varies from several weeks to one year.

Concerns in the pre-deployment stage may include: How will the children handle

# Understanding Separation



the separation? Will my marriage survive? In this very busy and difficult time, these issues often are left unresolved.

### Deployment. (1-11 months.)

Operationally, deployment is the period from the service member's departure from home through the first month of the deployment. It is followed by a period of sustainment, lasting about 2-11 months, that the service member is away on military operations. In the minds of many family members, the periods of deployment and sustainment are regarded almost synonymously to describe the time that a service member is away from family. The reaction to this phase may depend in part on the contact between the deployed family member and the family. Technological advances

in cell phone and satellite networks have greatly improved the ability to stay in close touch, which can help families cope with the separation. Many rely on the military family networks (e.g., Family Readiness Groups) for support and information as well as having phone and e-mail access to communicate with the deployed family member and the family. The response of children to extended deployment of a parent is quite individualized and also depends on their developmental age. It is reasonable to assume that a sudden negative change in a child's behavior or mood is a predictable response to the stress of having a deployed parent. At the close of this period, there is generally intense anticipation as service members are returned home (i.e., redeployed).

**Source:** National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

**Post-deployment.** (3-6 months.) The post-deployment stage begins with the arrival to home station. As with the pre-deployment stage, the time frame for this stage is variable depending on the circumstances of the service member. Typically, this stage lasts from three to six months. This stage starts with re-deployment of the service member—the “homecoming” of the deployed service member. Reunion and successful reintegration of the service member back into the family require patience and communication for all family members to adjust to new changes. It is characterized by intense anticipation. This can be a particularly challenging time to manage expectations, especially for children, as reintegration of the family becomes imminent. Children, youth, and teens may experience a wide range of feelings depending on their age and understanding of why their parent was gone. Primary and middle-school age children may seek a lot of attention. Teens may be moody or distant. Commonly, children will align themselves with the stay-at-home parent. Some may be fearful of the next separation and deployment.

## Reactions to Deployment by Stage of Deployment

Today’s deployments are more extended, more dangerous, and more widespread for service members in the active duty and reserve components alike. Not a lot is known about the reactions of military children to these extended separations and deployments. So far, there is evidence that the days leading up to deployment and up to return (reunion and reintegration) are the most stressful for family members. Whether there is an “emotional” distinction between high-threat deployments (combat operations and operations other than war in a

high-threat environment) and low-threat deployments (peace keeping operations) throughout the separation is not yet understood.

Some common experiences include:

### Pre-deployment

- Pre-deployment is especially stressful for parents, and both stressful and confusing to children who may not understand why one or both of their parents must leave.

**Pre-deployment is . . . stressful and confusing to children who may not understand why one or both of their parents must leave.**



**The majority of families eventually reach a “new normal” in daily life activities without the deployed spouse or parent.**

- Families may feel shock or disbelief that their family member must leave.
- The order, security, and safety of their lives will feel temporarily shattered.
- The deploying service member may feel less available to the family during separations for deployment.

### Deployment

- The day of departure, military personnel are regarded as dedicated, self-sacrificing, and courageous, especially during wartime.
- After the event fades, however, the community goes on while

families struggle with grief and new responsibilities and routines.

- Some family members may reach different levels of adjustment; some develop coping skills and are ready to resume their lives with renewed resiliency and hope. Some may struggle with past problems and new conflicts while others may continue to suffer from feelings of depression.
- The majority of families eventually reach a “new normal” in daily life activities without the deployed spouse or parent.



***New independence may have developed in spouses and youth that is not easily surrendered, and conflicts may arise over roles and responsibilities.***

## **Post-deployment/Reunion**

- There is much joy at the return of the deployed spouse or parent, but old issues must be addressed and resolved as the family reincorporates the returned family member.
- New independence may have developed in spouses and youth that is not easily surrendered, and conflicts may arise over roles and responsibilities.
- The family will not be just as it was before deployment, which must be discussed.
- “Normalcy” may not be as quick and smooth as you might imagine. Be cautious.

## **Separation Effects Due to Deployment—Other Considerations**

Separation from a parent or parents due to deployment can leave many children, youth, and teens feeling anxious or depressed. Some children may “mirror” the reactions of the remaining parent or a sibling. At the same time, there are some **positive** aspects of separation for children, particularly in the middle and late childhood years. Separation may provide for personal growth, opportunities to develop independent behaviors, and chances to meet and befriend new peers.

For military children, some of the **positives** can include:

- Fosters maturity—military children have more varied experiences than non-military children.
- Provides opportunities to acquire new skills and develop hidden interests and abilities by taking on responsibilities in a parent’s absence.
- Encourages independence—youth and teens learn to be self-starters and more resourceful.
- Prepares for future separations and building new friendships.
- Strengthens family cohesion among siblings and the remaining parent. For some military families, the emotional

adjustments during separation can lead them to discover new sources of internal strength and support.

**Sources:**  
*National Center for Children Exposed to Violence  
Military.com*



***Separation may provide for personal growth, opportunities to develop independent behaviors, and chances to meet and befriend new peers.***

# Parents

Custodians and Other Primary Caregivers—Relatives, Family Friends



## **If You Are a Parent, Custodian, or Other Primary Caregiver . . .**

Military parents and their spouses or partners not only have to cope with the absence of their loved one but must also ensure the well-being of their children. Children's reactions to the absence of a parent or other primary caregiver are affected by a variety of factors: personality, age, maturity level, experience with past deployments, and whether the parent has been deployed to a high-threat environment. Other factors include the special circumstances of other primary caregivers, such as relatives and family friends who care for children when dual-military parents are deployed. The following section is designed to help you help your child deal with deployment.

The topics covered are:

- Talking to children about deployment
- Emotional cycles of deployment
- Warning signs that your child might be having trouble adjusting
- Special considerations for coping with high-threat deployments
- Tips on how to help your children cope with deployment
- How to help children adjust to changes in care
- If you are a single parent or both parents are deployed
- Care for the caregiver: How to take care of yourself.

**Talking to Children about Deployment**

It is important for parents and other primary caregivers to talk to children and youth about deployment early and frequently. It is also important not to put

off telling children of the deployment; they can become involved in preparing for the separation, and it gives them a chance to ask questions and better understand the situation.

Both parents, if possible, should tell the children together about deployment. This reinforces family unity and allows parents and youth to express their feelings about the separation.

All discussions about the separation should be honest, straightforward, and factual. Discuss the reasons for the assignment and the deployment in terms that everyone can understand.

Even after parents have discussed the upcoming separation with their children, it is important to recognize that children may hear a

wide range of comments and perspectives from their peers, which may differ widely depending on the community in which they live. Keep an open channel of communication to dispel misinformation and rumors.



**Both parents, if possible, should tell the children together about deployment. This reinforces family unity and allows parents and youth to express their feelings about the separation.**



**Emotional confusion . . . characterized by feelings of loss, emptiness, and abandonment.**

**Emotional Cycles of Deployment**

Parents should always keep an eye on their children and anticipate signs of distress or trouble during the entire deployment cycle. The emotional cycles of deployment are explained below. The timelines described are a general guideline, and parents and children may experience emotions outside of the timeline.

**Expectation for separation:** occurs 6-8 weeks before deployment, characterized by excitement, denial, fear, or anger.

**Emotional withdrawal:** occurs 1 week before deployment, characterized by ambivalence, fear, or anger.

**Emotional confusion:** occurs 1-6 weeks after departure, characterized by feelings of loss, emptiness, and abandonment.

**Adjustment:** during the deployment, may include feelings of hope, worry, calm, loneliness, and some other emotions from pre-deployment, which should not be for prolonged periods.

**Expectation for reunion:** occurs 6-8 weeks prior to homecoming, characterized by both feelings of worry and apprehension but also excitement and anticipation. Think about the problems that will arise and plan on how to handle them when they do.

**Honeymoon:** can last about a day or until the first argument, characterized by feelings of euphoria, excitement, and confusion.

**Readjustment:** occurs 1-6 weeks after the return, and may have feelings of happiness, excitement, and satisfaction.

*Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network*





**Warning Signs That Your Child Might Be Having Trouble Adjusting**

Parents should watch their child closely for signs that he or she is having trouble coping. It is important to involve others in watching out for children. Ask teachers and other caregivers to look for the following signs that your child is having trouble coping:

**General signs**

- Excessive clinginess
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplainable aches and pains
- Disobedience
- Hyperactivity
- Speech difficulties
- Aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- Regressive behavior (i.e., thumb-sucking, bedwetting, may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, monsters).

Source: National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

**Watch your child closely for . . . difficulties at school such as a drop in grades or disinterest in classroom learning.**

**For school-age children**

- Difficulties at school such as a drop in grades or disinterest in classroom learning
- May become anxious and aggressive
- Anger toward at-home parent.

**For adolescents**

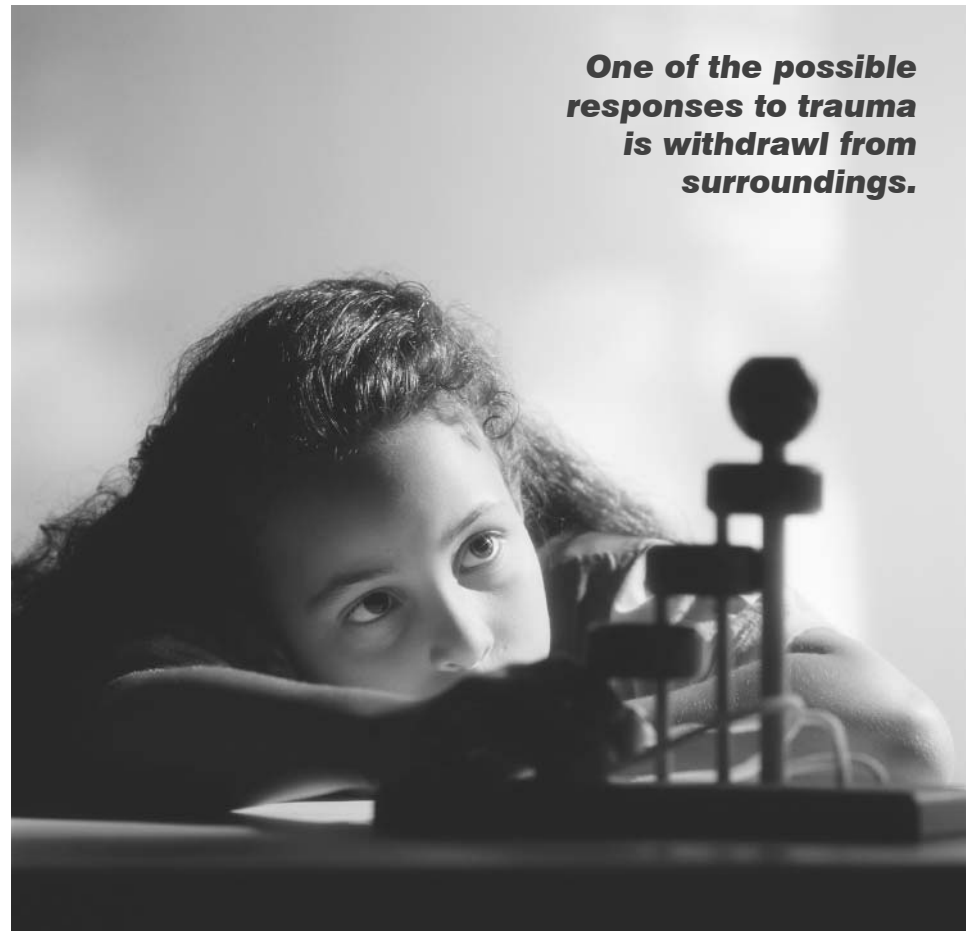
- Acting-out behaviors (trouble at school, home, law)
- Low self-esteem and self-criticism
- Misdirected anger (over-reactive anger, anger directed at family members)
- Sudden or unusual school problems
- Loss of interest in usual interests and hobbies.

To help children through this difficult time, you should talk with them often about their feelings. For some children, it may be difficult for them to talk openly. Try giving them activities to help them express themselves if they do not want to talk (e.g., draw a picture, write a story, keep a journal, communicate with the deployed parent, play music). If, however, after a prolonged period problems persist, you may need to seek help from a mental health professional, school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or pediatrician, or consult your local military resources.

**Special Considerations for Coping with High-threat Deployments**

During high-threat deployments, there is an increased risk that the parent who has been deployed may experience mental or physical injury or may be killed in combat. It is important that parents be aware of how their children may react to traumatic events. How parents respond to a traumatic event strongly influences their child(ren)'s ability to recover from the event. Possible responses to trauma are presented on the next page.

**One of the possible responses to trauma is withdrawal from surroundings.**



**Possible Responses to Trauma**  
*Elementary school children*

- Regressive behaviors
- Difficulty concentrating in school; possible refusal to go to school
- Stomach aches or other bodily pain
- Depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt, and emotional numbing
- Difficulty controlling their own behaviors
- Outbursts of anger, fighting, and other disruptive behaviors
- Sleep problems, perhaps nightmares, may persist
- May show extreme withdrawal from surroundings as well as withdrawal of trust from adults.

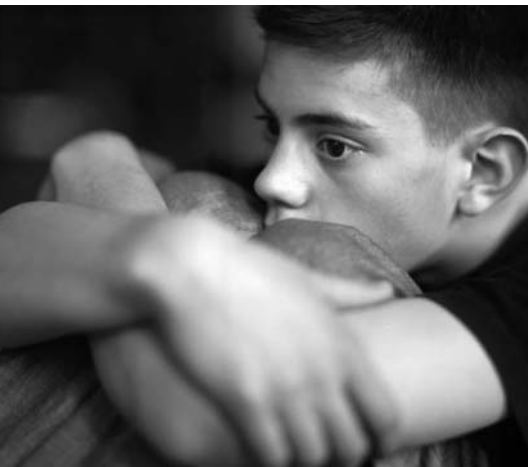
**Adolescents**

- May have a tendency to become more childlike in attitude
- May be very angry at the unfairness of the traumatic incident
- May try to avoid any reminders of the traumatic event
- May try to suppress thoughts and feelings to avoid confronting the event



- May have a sense that their existence is meaningless or purposeless
- May feel anger, shame, betrayal, and act out their frustrations through rebellious actions in school
- May experience extreme guilt over their failure to prevent injury or loss of life
- May show signs of withdrawal and isolation
- May be judgmental about one's own behavior and the behavior of others
- May exhibit responses similar to adults in their post-traumatic stress reactions such as flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional numbing
- May develop eating and sleeping disorders.

Source: Office of Casualty Assistance



**Tips on How to Help Your Children Cope with Deployment**

- Keep your children informed.
- Share your own feelings.
- Provide extra support and reassurance.
- Involve children in planning how to cope.
- Reach out to others.
- Take advantage of existing resources.
- Address concerns that a loved one may be injured or killed.
- Be willing to discuss the concept of death.
- Recognize and respond to changes in behavior.
- Be aware of youngsters at higher risk.
- Maintain good communication between home and school.
- Encourage your child to express any fears or anxiety he or she may be experiencing—and listen carefully. Reassure your child that these arrangements are only temporary.
- Try to maintain a sense of family routine despite changes.
- Answer questions with accurate information and relate it to the children's worries.
- Discuss Friends' ideas and correct misinformation.
- Encourage open expression of children's feelings through talk, play, drawings, etc.
- Be aware of your own emotional reactions around your children.
- Do not rely on your children for emotional support.

Sources:  
LifeCare, Inc.  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Center for Children Exposed to Violence



**Try to maintain a sense of family routine despite changes.**

### Pre-deployment Tips

- Give realistic messages about the length of the loved one's absence.
- Discuss ways in which you or your loved one will stay connected during the absence.
- Create as much quality time together as possible before the parent deploys.
- Engage the child in departure planning.
- Bestow rather than “dump” responsibilities on remaining family members; children will feel needed and important when they have chores and responsibilities.
- Make plans for the family to continue to progress together, and include the deployed parent in ongoing projects.
- Help your children find where the parent will be located on a world map.
- Take pictures of the deployed parent with each child for them to keep.
- Reassure your children that you will help them manage while the parent is gone.
- Involve your children in the preparations by helping the deploying parent pack, having them make a “deployment box,” or exchanging tokens between parent and child.
- Spend individual time with each child before you leave.
- Offer comfort by touching and holding children.
- Develop a plan with your children for staying connected while you are away (phone calls, letters, e-mails, audio/videotapes, etc.);



**On a world map, help your children find where the parent will be located.**

include a backup plan if the first choice is not available.

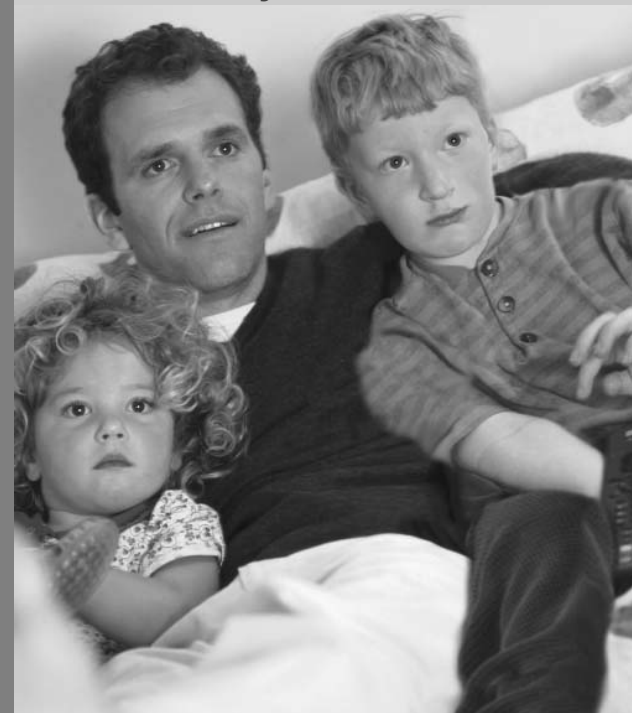
- Write short notes to your children and ask a parent or caregiver to hide them in lunchboxes, backpacks, toy boxes, etc., as a surprise.
- Tell your children that the parent is leaving because he or she is doing a special job for our country.
- Remind them that you have managed before during times of separation, if the parent has been deployed in the past.

Sources:  
Hooah4Health  
LifeCare, Inc.

### Deployment Tips

- Continue family traditions and develop new ones.
- Be relatively open about sharing concerns and news about the deployed family member. To children no news is bad news.
- Set up a calendar to count down the weeks until the parent will return (if known) and personalize it with birthdays and other events to help the child grasp the time span.
- Make a paper chain of links or put beans in a jar and ceremoniously remove one each day or week to count down to arrival or count the time since the family member's departure.
- Help children make a list of tasks they can do to help out during deployment.
- Remind children that the same rules/limits apply while the parent is away.
- Help children stay in touch with the deployed parent through letters, phone calls, e-mail, etc.
- Remind children that the deploying parent loves them and will be counting down the days to be with them.
- Limit television watching or watch TV with your children and talk with them about what they see.

### **Limit television watching or watch TV with your children and talk with them about what they see.**



- Stay connected with a deployed parent by participating in the Uniting Through Reading program.
- Remind children that everyone has changed somewhat while the parent has been away.
- Talk about how it may take time for everyone to adjust to being a family again.
- Stay connected by creating a family Web site for family members and friends to post messages and pictures.

Sources:  
Hooah4Health  
LifeCare, Inc.  
National Fatherhood Initiative

### Post-deployment Reunion Tips

- Keep family routines as normal as possible during the return of a parent.
- Help your children plan a special “Welcome Home” celebration.
- Include the returning parent in all family decisions.
- Remind your children that the same rules/limits apply now that the parent has returned.
- When you return, take it easy and let things happen naturally; give your children “warm up” time to readjust to you at their own pace.
- Arrange a special time with each child to reconnect (have a picnic, ride a carousel, go to the video arcade, etc.).
- Spend time with your children looking at the family scrapbook, their artwork, schoolwork, etc.
- Show an interest in everyday events of your children’s lives.
- Find out what new interests your children developed while you were away.
- Praise your children for helping out while you were away.
- Give each child a “bravery medal” for being brave while you were gone.
- Discuss your feelings about returning and encourage your children to do the same.
- Ease back into family routines.
- Discipline your children with care and love.
- Expect changes in your children physically, socially, and emotionally.

- Understand that children may view you as a stranger or have new and different responses to you. They may be angry that you have been gone, they may have forgotten what it was like to have you at home, they may view you as a rival, and feel jealousy toward you.
- Expect changes in your spouse; he or she is likely to be more independent and/or has developed new friendships or skills.
- Your spouse may have new ways of managing the children, household tasks, finances, etc.

Sources:  
National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
Healthy Parenting Initiative



**Expect changes in your children physically, socially, and emotionally.**

### How to Help Children Adjust to Changes in Care

For some families, the deployment of one or both parents may require a change in childcare. This can be a difficult adjustment for a child of any age—the disruption of routine and comfort level with their primary caregiver. There are, however, things parents and caregivers can do to help make this change less traumatic for a child. These include:

- Reassure children that the changes are temporary and that you will be there to help them adjust.
- Point out both how routines will change and how they will remain the same.
- Ensure that any school change is addressed.
- Explain why normal care arrangements will be disrupted.
- Arrange for the child(ren) to meet the caregiver ahead of time, and if possible, spend some time together with the child and the caregiver.
- Allow the child to bring a toy or keepsake with them to the new environment.
- Stay in close contact with the caregiver to monitor your child’s adjustment.

- Be patient and reassuring while your child is adjusting, but if the behavior changes are particularly negative and/or last a long time, consult your pediatrician or mental health professional.

Sources:  
Harris, Rothenberg International  
LifeCare, Inc.



**Reassure children that the changes are temporary and that you will be there to help them adjust.**

### If You Are a Single Parent or Both Parents Are Deployed

- Review your plan for who will care for your children in your absence.
- Discuss with the caregiver how to talk to your children about what is happening and how to best make the necessary changes.
- Talk with your children about what is happening, and explain if possible where you are going, what you will be doing, when you will be leaving, and how long you will be gone.
- Keep routines in the new household, and discuss new routines that may have to be put in place.
- Stay in touch with the caregiver and your children.

### Care for the Caregiver: How to Take Care of Yourself

Just as important as paying attention to the warning signs and needs of your children is paying attention to your own warning signs and needs. Parents or primary caregivers left behind need to remember to take time to care for themselves. Some suggestions for the caregiver include:

- Sit and plan a schedule, and include your child(ren) if necessary.
- Realize the importance of time by yourself or with friends—it will give you more energy, you will be better able to take care of your children, and you will be more fun to be around.
- Express appreciation to your child when you take the time for yourself, and let him or her know how much better you feel.



**Know at least three of your neighbors—you may need their help . . .**

- Make sure you eat right (service member/Family Deployment Survival Handbook).
- Shop and cook for nutrition.
- Get enough rest.
- Make time for physical exercise.
- Treat yourself to a special outing, but stay within your budget.
- Try to set aside time to do something you enjoy everyday.
- Avoid trying to do everything yourself.
- Take advantage of military community support.
- Contact family, friends, neighbors, and spouses of other deployed service members whenever you need practical or emotional support.
- Get involved in an activity, hobby, project, church, or volunteering.
- Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed by your emotions or if you suspect that someone in your family is having emotional problems.
- Know at least three of your neighbors—you may need their help during an emergency and

- they can be a wonderful source of day-to-day support.
- Get financial help if needed—see a credit counselor to help you create a budget and keep your financial responsibilities.

**Sources:**  
 Healthy Parenting Initiative  
 National Fatherhood Initiative



**Avoid trying to do everything yourself.**

# Teachers



## **If You Are a Teacher . . .**

Teachers play an important role in the lives of military children because they can provide a sense of stability to students during a time when life at home may feel quite unsettled. Teachers can use separations and deployments to educate students in the areas of history, social sciences, and math and can create an opportunity for students to discuss their feelings about war and deployment with their peers. It is important for teachers to communicate with the parents of military children in order to be informed about upcoming deployments or reunions. Because most military children attend schools outside of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), it is extremely important for teachers in civilian communities to identify military children

and be aware of separation circumstances affecting those students. Additionally, teachers should communicate with parents to notify them of behavioral or academic problems their children may be experiencing due to deployment.

The following section is designed to help your students cope with separations and deployments.

The topics covered are:

- Warning signs that your students are not coping well
- Teacher interventions in the classroom
- Tips for helping students cope—for elementary school; middle and high school students.

**Warning Signs That Your Students Are Not Coping Well**

Whether you are teaching in a school on a military installation or in the surrounding community, be aware of military children who are experiencing separation from a parent or caregiver. Possible signs that students are having difficulty adjusting include:

- Excessive clinginess
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplainable aches and pains
- Disobedience
- Hyperactivity
- Speech difficulties
- Aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- Regressive behavior (i.e., thumb-sucking, bedwetting, may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, monsters)
- Difficulties at school.

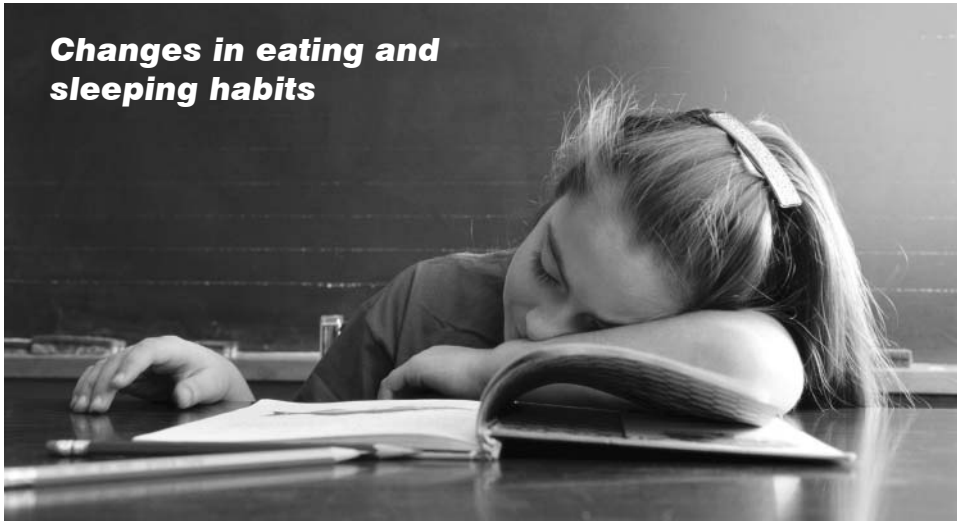
More serious signs that may persist for prolonged periods of time (6-8 weeks or longer) might include:

- Difficulty resuming normal classroom assignments and activities
- Continued high levels of emotional response such as continued crying and intense sadness
- Continued depression, withdrawal, and non-communicative behaviors
- Continued difficulty concentrating in school
- Expression of violent or depressed feelings in “dark” drawings or writings
- Intentionally hurting or cutting themselves or appear at risk for hurting others
- Gained or lost a significant amount of weight in a period of weeks
- Discontinued taking care of their personal appearance
- Exhibit a possible drug or alcohol abuse problem
- May become anxious and aggressive.

In these cases, it may be necessary to seek professional help for your student.

**Sources:**  
*LifeCare, Inc.*  
*National Center for Children Exposed to Violence*  
*National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

**Changes in eating and sleeping habits**



**Teacher Interventions in the Classroom**

As a teacher, there are many things you can do to help your students cope with separation. Examples include:

- Stay in touch with parents and community leaders.
- Assess student needs.
- Reach out to the community.
- Focus on students in the classroom learning experience.
- Provide structure to add support and consistency to the lives of students; find time, if necessary, to have students talk about their feelings, needs, and fears.
- Maintain objectivity about personal beliefs about war to help support students; respond to events calmly and answer questions in simple, direct terms.
- Reinforce safety and security for both the students and their parents.
- Be patient and reduce student work load or provide tutoring or mentoring support as needed.
- Listen to students’ questions and concerns and provide factual information to dispel rumors; be approachable, attentive, and sensitive to the unique needs of children coping with deployment and family separations.
- Be sensitive to language and cultural needs to assist students and their families appropriately.
- Acknowledge and validate feelings by helping students better understand



deployment and by letting them know that their feelings are normal and that everyone reacts and adjusts to separation differently.

- Reinforce age-appropriate anger management to keep a climate of nonviolence and acceptance.
- Use deployments as multi-subject teaching opportunities (geography, math, social studies) to help students better understand deployment.
- Make school a safe place by maintaining regular routines to give children a sense of continuity and stability, and/or encourage all school personnel to be attuned to the needs that children may have during this time.

**Sources:**  
*National Child Traumatic Stress Network*  
*National Association of School Psychologists*  
*Military Child Education Coalition*



**Paint or draw pictures reflecting feelings and thoughts about how to make things better.**

## **Tips for Teachers to Help Students Cope**

### **Elementary school kids**

- Engage in play activities.
- Paint or draw pictures reflecting feelings and thoughts about how to make things better.
- Write in a journal.
- Read and discuss stories about children in conflict and children as problem solvers.
- Write cards or letters to the deployed family member.
- Make a memory book or calendar reflecting positive thoughts and actions.
- Take part in individual and group counseling.

### **Middle and high school students**

- Keep a journal.
- Engage in art activities.
- Write poetry.
- Write stories.
- Write cards or letters to the deployed family member.
- Relax by doing deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.
- Learn problem-solving strategies.
- Participate in small group discussions.
- Participate in support groups.
- Exercise.
- Listen to music.
- Take part in individual and group counseling when problems arise.

*Source: Lifelines Services Network*



# Service Providers



## If You Are a Service Provider . . .

In today's climate of frequent and extended global missions, service members and their families are continuously challenged by family separations. Service providers offer a wide range of support for military families during deployments and other separations. Such support may include programs or initiatives that teach active and positive parenting, offer childcare, foster school learning, and promote community involvement. Other support services that prepare and sustain families

during separation may be specific to a military branch, component, installation, or local community. Often these include family readiness groups, financial readiness programs, Exceptional Family Member Programs, youth programs, chaplain services, special education programs, and counseling services. In addition, there are many service providers who—formally or informally—volunteer a wide range of services to a single family or to an entire community.

# Service Providers

## What Service Providers Can Do

Perhaps the greatest contribution service providers can make to assist children and families is direct community outreach. Community outreach promotes the visibility and accessibility of support programs and services that are available to families during separation. It is only with the community's ability to recognize signs of family distress—such as a spouse in financial difficulty or an exceptional child with unmet needs—that referrals can be made for the appropriate support services.

Another way that service providers can help children and families is by networking with local schools, civic, and religious organizations to encourage active engagement of parents, schools, and community in the academic, social, and physical competencies of children.

## Warning Signs That a Family Member Is Having Difficulties Coping with Separation

Like parents and teachers, service providers are often in a position to observe warning signs that families and children are having difficulty coping with separation. Some of the signs to look for include:

- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Aggressive, anxious, or withdrawn behavior
- Non-communicative
- Isolation
- Regressive behaviors
- Defiant behaviors

## Aggressive, anxious, or withdrawn behavior



# Service Providers

- Hyperactivity
- Difficulties outside the home, at school, at work
- Causes self-injury or injury to others
- Exhibits a possible drug or alcohol abuse problem
- Decline in personal appearance.

## **Taking Care of Yourself—Care for the Service Provider**

Service providers and other members of the helping professions contribute

enormously to the welfare of children and families, but do so often at considerable emotional and physical “expense.” Work stress and burnout are all too common in the helping professions, from school and mental health counselors to providers of volunteer child and respite care.

For all service providers, it is important to balance professional demands and personal needs. Providers should strive to achieve balanced caseloads through effective management skills.

**Sources:**  
*LifeCare, Inc.*  
*Healthy Parenting Initiative*

### **Tips on How to Take Care of Yourself**

- Take care of your own needs.
- Apply effective management techniques.
- Maintain healthy diet.
- Get enough rest.
- Make time for physical exercise.
- Try to set aside time to do something you enjoy everyday.
- Avoid trying to do everything yourself.
- Get involved in a hobby, project, or church activity.
- Seek help from a supervisor or colleague if you feel overwhelmed by work.



# Community Members



## If You Are a Community Member Who Has Contact with Someone in a Military Family ...

Community members can have important roles in the lives of military spouses and children. As friends and neighbors they can support the at-home parent by offering to watch the children for an afternoon for a parenting break, or they can help plan the reunion for a returning military family member. It is also important for the community as a whole to involve local organizations and schools to support military families and for military families

within a community to come together to support each other. The following section is designed to help you help your friends and neighbors deal with deployment.

The topics covered are:

- Warning signs that the family is not coping well
- Warning signs for children
- Warning signs for adults
- Tips for helping families cope with deployment
- Special tips for civilian families.

# Community Members

## Warning Signs That the Children in Your Community May Not Be Coping Well with Deployment

It is important for all members of the community to watch out for our children and support our military families. As we interact and observe the children in our community, we need to look for signs of trouble. These include:

- Excessive clinginess
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplainable aches and pains
- Disobedience
- Hyperactivity
- Speech difficulties
- Aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- Regressive behavior (i.e., thumb-sucking, bedwetting, may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, monsters)
- Difficulties at school
- May become anxious and aggressive.

## Warning Signs That the Parent Might Not Be Coping Well with the Deployment

In addition to the children, the parent or caregiver may also be struggling with the separation. Whether you are someone's best friend, neighbor, or member of the same congregation, you may find yourself in a position to notice problems. These may include:

- Signs of prolonged depression (extreme sadness, numbness, suicidal talk, extreme weight gain/loss, sleeplessness, tearfulness, drug/alcohol abuse, etc.)
- Lack of socializing
- Signs of extreme stress from dealing with children and new responsibilities.

### Sources:

LifeCare, Inc.  
National Center for Children Exposed to Violence  
Healthy Parenting Initiative



**Other community resources can partner with schools to make their services known to families and make them more accessible.**

## Tips for Helping Families Cope with Deployment

There are many ways community members can help families adjust to separation. Perhaps the best way is by being sensitive to the issues and pressures facing families dealing with deployment—ask children and adults about what they might need, and do not ask about potentially painful subjects. Other tips for helping are:

- Encourage adults to limit children's exposure to television, and read news articles first to determine if they are appropriate for children.
- Encourage children to discuss feelings about anti-war sentiments, and encourage adults to be thoughtful of children and the situations they are facing before speaking in front of them.
- Check in on children and families regularly and ensure that people are receiving help, if necessary.
- State explicitly that the community wants to support the family and will do the best that they can to help families deal with deployment.
- Encourage the formation of community networks to bring individuals and local organizations together to assist military families.
- Ensure schools understand their

stabilizing role in the changing lives of children.

- Other community resources can partner with schools to make their services known to families and make them more accessible.
- Encourage parents to be social and to schedule time for themselves—it will give them more energy to be a better parent.

Source: Military Child Education Coalition



**Encourage the formation of community networks to bring individuals and local organizations together to assist military families.**

## Tips for Civilian Families

You do not have to live on a military base or be part of the military to help families during times of separation. Suggestions for how civilians and their families can help include:

- Contact a military base to find opportunities to support the families of our service members.

- Ask a friend or coworker who is a military spouse how you can help. Perhaps you could arrange to pay for an outing such as movie tickets and dinner.
- Offer to watch the children for an evening to give military spouses some time alone or time to do something they enjoy.
- Donate to the USO, American Red Cross, or individual service relief funds to support our troops.

Source: Keith, 2004



**Arrange an outing with the children to give the military spouse some time alone.**

# A Final Word

This guide was prepared under the principle that the issues of separation of children and youth from family members who are serving in our military are not child issues or family issues—they are our nation's issues. The figure below displays the linkages inherent in this principle. The diagram identifies the members involved in the lives of our military children and youth, expressed in concentric circles. At the center of the diagram is our military's youth. Parents and caregivers provide the closest, most immediate support for their well-being. Beyond the parents and

immediate caregivers are the teachers, service providers, and community members who all participate in some way in the welfare of these military-connected children.

When a service member separates from his or her family, each of us has a responsibility for the child who is left behind. The information presented and the subsequent resources listed in this guide are intended to provide all members of a community with information and guidance on helping our youth cope with separation.



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