

You Are Not Alone: A Guide to Helping Your Children through Deployment

While deployment can be a traumatic time for most families, the experiences and challenges of deployment for the families of our National Guard and other Reservists often go misunderstood. One reason for this is that these families often live in civilian communities where there is limited awareness and understanding of what it means to be part of military life, and especially, of what it means to have a parent or primary caregiver go off to war. Thus, many of these children often do not receive the attention, care, and support that they require during deployment and reunion. While there is no right way to provide all of the attention and support that these children need, I am hopeful that this article will provide valuable information to help you understand and support children during and after deployment. Because a child's age plays such a crucial role in his or her experiences and needs during and after deployment, we will look at how to recognize and respond to children's needs based on their developmental stage.

PRESCHOOL

What Your Child May Understand	How Your Child May Behave	What Your Child May Feel & Need
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• understand environment based on how changes affect them directly.• once a parent is deployed, your child will begin to understand more about what deployment means because his parent will no longer be residing in the home.• he will understand separation from his parent and will most likely notice changes in his daily routine.• your child may also wonder if he did something to cause his parent to leave.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• irritable• clingy• demanding more attention• regressing to younger behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb sucking• having trouble staying asleep or falling asleep• having trouble separating from you or other family members• acting out with aggression or anger• acting out scary or disturbing events in his play activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• confused• guilty• surprised by the changes• needs to know there is an adult who will be there to provide safety and comfort• needs daily routines and schedules, such as meals, story time, bedtime, to remain as much the same as before deployment

What you can do:

To help your preschooler with deployment, it is going to be very helpful to maintain daily routines and schedules as this will help your child feel safe and secure. Spending extra time with your child, providing comfort, reassurance, and closeness will also meet his or her demand for extra attention during this difficult time. You can also help by paying close attention to play activities. Observe how your child is playing and if there are any themes or repetitive play activities. Remember that play is a safe activity for preschoolers to explore feelings, thoughts,

and self-soothing. During this time, you will also want to protect your child from scary details about deployment in the news or in talking with family and friends.

ELEMENTARY

What Your Child May Understand	How Your Child May Behave	What Your Child May Feel & Need
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• may understand more than preschool children• tend to associate what they hear and see about deployment to their own parent• may assume the worst is happening to their parent even when parent is not in danger• may have difficulty reasoning and separating what they hear or see from what is happening with their parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• regressing to younger behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb sucking• rapid mood swings, such as anger one minute and then clinging to you the next minute• changes in eating, such as eating more or less• changes in sleeping patterns, to include sleeping more or less• acting out in anger or aggression at either parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• anger• sadness• worry• guilt• confused• need to have routines maintained• need to know the remaining parent will continue to care for them• need a trusted adult with whom they can talk safely about their questions and concerns• need to continue to feel connected to the deployed parent.

What you can do:

During this time, your school-age child will benefit tremendously from your help in their development and enjoyment of fun activities. Perhaps your daughter has always wanted to take ballet lessons or maybe your son has wanted to learn how to ride a bike like his big brother or father. Now would be a great time to encourage involvement in such activities. Research has shown that children who participate in fun activities cope better with deployment (see [Survey Report](#) for more information). Just as with your preschooler, with your school-age child, you want to maintain daily routines and schedules. Children who have routines and structure not only feel safer, but their lives feel more predictable during such an unpredictable time. You will also want to spend extra time with your child, offering reassurance, comfort and closeness. You may notice your child playing certain games that may be disturbing or role playing with dolls or stuffed animals. Simply observe the themes of the play activities and keep in mind that play is a safe way for children to explore confusing and difficult feelings. If there are any concerns about the disturbing or perhaps violent play, consider speaking with a professional counselor. You will also want to protect your child from scary details about deployment. This may mean watching less news on television or talking with family and friends about what is or is not appropriate to discuss in front of the children. School-age children also need to know that the deployed

member is still part of daily family life. Keep discussions about the deployed member as part of each day or have photos of the deployed member close by for daily conversations.

MIDDLE-HIGH SCHOOL

What Your Child May Understand	How Your Child May Behave	What Your Child May Feel & Need
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• understand deploying parent will be out of the home for some time• may assume that while deployed parent is away that he or she must assume the role of parent/adult to support remaining parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• may direct anger at remaining caregiver and/or siblings• may act out or misdirect other behaviors, even at self such as self-harming behaviors, (i.e. cutting)• sudden changes or problems at school• appearance of loss of interest, lack of communication, minimize feelings• possible drug use• increased importance of and time spent with friends• assume responsibilities of adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• anger• sadness• depressed moods or depression• anxiety• fear• need time with peers• need individual time with remaining parent• need parent monitoring changes in school, friendships, and behaviors• need to talk safely about their feelings and questions• need to feel connected to deployed parent

What you can do:

For your preteen and teenager, time with their peers may become increasingly important. You will want to encourage your teen to spend time with his or her friends, and you will also want to monitor any changes in friendships, types of friends, or behaviors with friends. Encourage and support your teen to get involved or stay involved in extracurricular activities. For this age group, research also shows that teens who are involved in enjoyable activities cope better emotionally and mentally with deployment and reunion. While some teens require time with their friends, they also need routines and rules to be maintained. Your teen may not seem to like rules and routines, but he or she really does want structure. This structure will also include time for studying and relaxation, both of which must be protected for the health of your preteen or teen. Other teens may not increase their time spent with friends, but rather may feel the need to co-parent or take on adult responsibilities of the household or caretaking of younger siblings. Be sure to maintain appropriate responsibilities for your child's age group. Children who take on responsibilities that are inappropriate for their age such as running the household or caretaking of a sibling may develop anxiety or other concerns that are difficult to handle. While teens may be spending more time with peers or may want to take over responsibilities in the household, they will also need encouragement from you to express their thoughts and feelings. Let your teen know that you are available for him or her to talk any time they need. Listen when your teen

talks and validate his or her feelings. If your teen does not want to talk, consider providing your teen with a journal to express and sort through challenging thoughts and emotions.

As you can see, there are several ways to respond to children's needs during deployment depending upon their ages. While this is not a complete list, I hope that this article offers a start to help you first recognize and identify your child's needs and then to guide you through ways to respond. By responding to their needs, you and other adults in your child's life can make a critical difference in how deployment affects your family. Thank you for all that you and your family do.

Sources

"SOFAR" Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope with the Deployment and Return of a Parent in the National Guard and Other Reserve Components. Diane E. Levin, Ph.D, Carol Iskols Daynard, EdD, Beverly Ann Dexter, Ph.D. 2008.