

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



DEPLOYMENT

KEEPING RELATIONSHIPS STRONG



This brochure focuses on how to help your baby or toddler feel secure by keeping relationships strong whether you are at home together or halfway across the world. Choose an idea or two to support your child, your family, and yourself.

In a way it will be a relief when he is gone. Then we can count the days until he comes back instead of counting the days until he leaves.

When you are over in Iraq, your family is all you have. When we talked on the phone, I'd say, "Everything is fine with me. Tell me about everything at home with you and our baby."

Overview: The Power of Relationships

The little things you say and do each day—and the way you say and do them—shape your child's growing picture of who she is. Through your interactions, your child begins to learn what she can expect from you, other people, and the world around her.

When you respond to your child in loving, consistent ways as you feed and cuddle him, change his diaper, play, sing, or read a book together, you say to your child:

- "I love you. You are special."
- "You are safe."
- "You can trust me—and others—to be there for you."
- "The world is filled with interesting, fun things to explore and discover."

Your relationship with your child gives her a base of security that allows her to explore, discover, and learn. When you share her excitement about her latest discovery, you nurture her inborn curiosity and desire to understand her world. When you respond in loving ways, you help buffer her from stress.

Building a trusting, nurturing relationship with your child means (a) trying to understand what his sounds, words, gestures, and actions tell you and (b) responding to those messages. It can be hard to pay close attention to him when you are coping with goodbyes and changes that are part of deployment.

What do you think?
Think of someone with whom you have a trusting, nurturing relationship.

- How do you feel with this person?
- What does he/she do that makes you feel this way?

WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

To support your child, begin by trying to understand your experiences and feelings.

Researchers have identified a cycle of deployment with five stages. This brochure focuses on the first three: predeployment, active deployment, and sustainment.

- **Predeployment**, the time before deployment, is often strained with endless “Honey-do lists,” and uncertainty about the future. Arguments between spouses typically increase as it gets closer to saying “goodbye.” Why? It’s easier to get upset at someone than feel the pain of parting. It can be helpful—and difficult—for couples in this stage to talk about what they expect of each other while they are apart.
- **Active deployment** lasts from departure through the first month or so of deployment. It is commonly a time filled with emotional ups and downs.
- **Sustainment** lasts until the month before the Service member returns home. This is when the parent at home establishes new routines, builds a support network, and begins to feel “I can do this.” Still there is ongoing concern and worry about what the Service member may be experiencing, especially when he or she is in a combat zone.
- **Redeployment** is the month before the Service member returns home. This is a time of deep and mixed feelings.
- **Postdeployment** begins with arrival home and typically lasts 3 to 6 months.

A survey recently conducted by the National Military Family Association (NMFA) reveals that families experiencing multiple deployments think about deployment as a “spiral.” This describes their feeling of never getting back to the place they started as they reunite knowing another deployment is coming.

Having names for different stages of deployment or having the image of a spiral in your mind can be helpful. Although you and your family will have your own experience of deployment, these models, based on the experiences of many others, offer some comfort of knowing what to expect and knowing you are not alone.

Still, coping with deployment takes an incredible amount of emotional energy. It can leave you feeling distracted or “noisy” inside. This can interfere with your ability to focus on your child. It can be difficult to “read” her signals and respond. It can disrupt the familiar, soothing routines and rhythms of your everyday life together.

Knowing how your experiences and feelings can impact how you respond is the first step in supporting your child during deployment. This isn’t to say you won’t feel stress or at times wish you could do a better job. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. Your child doesn’t need you to be perfect. He needs you to be you, doing the very best you can to support him during this challenging time.

The next step is thinking about what deployment means to her.



WHAT YOUR CHILD MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

Next, try to understand what your child experiences and feels.

Your child under 3 doesn't know about stages of deployment—or even what a spiral is—but she definitely knows something is up.

Deployment is an honorable separation. However, for your baby or toddler, it means that one of the most important people in her life is going to be away for a long time. Although each child will respond in their own way, depending on her age, personality, and the support she receives, young children will notice and may mourn. Although sometimes they may act as if nothing has changed, other times they may feel uncertain, sad, afraid, or angry.

Behaviors You Might See

Watching your child from the outside can help you understand what she is experiencing on the inside. Here are some ways your child may be saying “This is a hard time for me”:

- Increased clinginess, crying, and whining
- Greater fear of separation from the parent at home or other primary guardian
- Increase in aggressive behavior
- Withdrawing
- More difficulty in becoming interested in and taking part in activities
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- More frustration and difficulty comforting
- A return to earlier behaviors, such as waking up at night, toileting accidents, and thumb sucking
- Increase in attention-getting behaviors, both positive and negative

Saying Goodbye

Whether your goodbyes occur at your front door or at an installation ceremony, it is important to give your older baby or toddler a chance to say goodbye—and for the Service member to say goodbye, too. Even if he is too young to understand exactly what is happening, your child will be learning that the important people in his life do not simply disappear.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

Finally, use what you have learned to decide how best to respond.

Babies and toddlers are amazingly resilient and resourceful. When you provide your child with a secure base, you reinforce these traits. You provide a steadiness and an emotional fuel on which she can rely.

Here are some steps you can take to support your child during each stage of deployment, whether you are the parent at home or serving your country around the globe. We begin with ideas of how to take care of yourself, your spouse, and your relationship. Why? Because you are your child's home base and by strengthening your connection, you support each other, making her base even more solid and strong.

PREDEPLOYMENT

Take care of yourself, your spouse, and your relationship

- **Use all the time you have to prepare.** If you are lucky enough to have some time to prepare, try not to put off everything you have to do until the last minute.
- **Plan together to care together.** This brochure has ideas of things you can do and say as you work together to care for your child.
- **Be prepared for the intense and often mixed feelings that are part of deployment, no matter how many times you've been through it.** Most parents report increased tension between them and a feeling of distance as deployment approaches. Knowing that this is a natural response can help.
- **Know that you are not alone in having tough questions.** Will we still be a loving family? What if I don't come back? Often unspoken,



these questions and others hang in the air before deployment. There are no easy answers. Everyone has their own way of dealing with hard issues like these. However, it often helps to talk about them, and it can make you feel more connected as you prepare to be apart. As one dad says:



We didn't talk much about what if I didn't come back before I left for Iraq. But when I got there, I realized it was a possibility. I called my wife and we talked about how she would explain to my son what happened to me if something did. It took a weight off our minds.

- **Remember, most couples argue more as it gets closer to deployment.** It is a way of trying to protect your heart for the separation. Some couples find it helpful when they argue to stop and ask: “Is this something we really need to argue about? Or is this about the deployment?”
- **Plan how you will keep in touch.** Will you write letters? Use e-mail? Video? Phone calls?
- **Talk about your expectations of yourselves and each other.** Whether you are concerned about your spouse remaining faithful or how often you can count on receiving a care package, try to talk about it.

To Do and Make: With and for Your Child

As children’s thinking and remembering skills develop, photographs, stories, tape recordings, and letters can help them deal with a parent’s absence. Each is a treasure in itself, yet each is even more meaningful because it carries with it feelings of the deep love and connection between the child and parent who is away.

- **Make audiotapes or videotapes of the Service member reading a story or singing a good night song.** These can become part of a child’s goodnight ritual.
- **Take photos of family members doing everyday things together.** Cover them with contact paper and hang them at child height on the wall in the kitchen, bedroom—even in the bathroom. Seal some of the photos in clear contact paper for children to handle and carry around.
- **Make a message box.** Fill it with short messages and/or drawings. A toddler can choose one when he misses his parent who is away.
- **Make a family photo book or journal.** Make a copy for the Service member and one to stay at home. Over the weeks and months, write in the journals, add photos, and the child’s drawings. These can be good conversation starters later during reunification.
- **Pack a letter-writing kit.** Include envelopes, paper, markers, scissors, and tape that the deployed parent can use to send letters home.
- **Give your child a way to hold on to his parent when she is away.** Give your child a t-shirt or cap that the Service member regularly wears.

What do you think?

- What are the items on your TO DO list?
- Which of these items can you take care of together before deployment?
- Who can help Mom after deployment?

DURING ACTIVE DEPLOYMENT AND SUSTAINMENT

On the Home Front

Many of the following suggestions are opportunities from everyday life to “bathe” your child in the memories and feelings of connectedness with the parent on active duty. Be aware, however, that your child’s needs with regard to “staying-connected” activities may change day to day and depend on her age. For example, your child may resist drawing a picture for Mommy every day, or no longer want to listen to the story tape Daddy made. On the other hand, she may want to listen to it tomorrow.

Remember that you are not alone. Let other caregivers—child care providers, babysitters, neighbors—know your Service member is away and what they can do to help out.

Take care of yourself. No one can continually give and nurture on “empty.” (See the brochure *Taking Care of You* for more about this.)

Supporting your baby or toddler:

Strategies you may want to use include:

- **Offer extra hugs, kisses, and cuddles.** You will feel better, too.
- **Keep reminders of Mom or Dad around.** For example, keep Mom’s jacket hanging on the hook by the door where it always is. Keep family photos out. Sing the same lullaby that Daddy sang.
- **Stick to your daily routines the best you can.** Knowing what to expect helps young children feel in control and safe. As one mom says, “We found out it was a really bad idea to introduce her to too many new things at once.”
- **Create a daily ritual to celebrate the deployed parent.** For example, you might say goodnight and kiss a picture of your Service member at bedtime.
- **Repeat the message: “Your daddy (or mommy) loves you.”** Do this even for young babies. A child’s understanding will grow along the way. In the meantime, they will find comfort in the ritual.

- **Expect that there is likely to be regression (a return to earlier behaviors) and other challenging behaviors on the part of the child.** Your child may start waking up during the night again or cry for his bottle.
- **Keep your sense of humor.** Sharing a laugh can make everyone feel connected.

Supporting your toddler:

In addition to the ideas above:

- **Offer your child activities that let him express his feelings in healthy and safe ways.** Toddlers don’t have the vocabulary to express their emotions. Sometimes their only resort is to physically express what they are feeling. One mom reports: “My daughter became increasingly volatile after I left. One of the things we gave her to channel her anger was a child’s punching bag.” Other ways to help children express feelings include giving them lots of time for active outdoor play and offering expressive materials such as playdough, dress-ups, crayons, and markers.
- **Set clear, consistent limits in positive and flexible ways.** Being reminded again that she can’t climb on the back of the sofa can help your toddler feel a sense of order and safety because she knows you are watching and will keep her safe.
- **Explain to toddlers and twos what is happening using simple and clear words.** Help children feel safe. Assure them their parent who is deployed is as safe as he can be. “Remember how Daddy holds your hand to keep you safe when you cross the street? Daddy and his friends help each other stay safe, too.”
- **Help children succeed and gain confidence they can handle challenging times.** For example, place a stool by the bathroom sink so a toddler can turn on the water and wash his own hands.
- **Hold hands across the miles.** Trace and cut out your child’s handprint. Send two copies. Have the deployed parent trace her hand over the child’s hand. Then send a copy home.



Supporting Your Child From Away

No matter how far away you are, or for how long, you can still hold your child in your mind. Being held in another person's mind helps a young child feel safe and connected. (It can help us adults feel that way, too.)

Feeling connected doesn't ensure that your child will remember your face, especially if she is under 2 years old. Even if she does, she is likely to need time to "warm up" to you when you walk in the door. (For more on this, see the brochure *Reunification*.)

The important thing is that there is a connection between you and your child that helps your child feel loved when you are away and will flourish when you are back together again.

- **Carry your child with you**—in your heart, thoughts, helmet, or pocket:
 - o Remember things you did together
 - o Carry her picture in your pocket
 - o Tell stories about her
 - o Dream about what you will say and do together when you get home



- **Keep in touch with the latest news during phone calls and on e-mail.** Ask basic questions: What did she eat for lunch today? What is she doing that's new?



- **Send letters or drawings for your child to enjoy now and to go in the family scrapbook for children as they get older.** Older babies, toddlers, and twos love getting mail.

Remember the Wonder of the Everyday

Take time to enjoy singing, laugh, read, cuddle, take a walk, scribble, glue, dig in the sandbox, pick a flower, play dress-up, scrub potatoes for dinner, mix pancakes, make an obstacle course, or feed your pet fish together with your child. Treasuring these everyday moments and sharing photos and stories of them with your Service member will help your child feel safe and loved during a challenging time.

The Little Things You Say and Do Can Make a Big Difference—In a Child's Words

Understanding what your child may be experiencing can help you see how much you are doing each and every day to support her:

When you . . .	You help me . . .
Maintain a regular routine	Feel safe and secure.
Stay patient and calm when I am upset and clingy	Regain control and feel safe.
Give me some extra hugs and cuddles	Reassure me I am loved and safe. We'll both feel better.
Tell me what is happening in simple words	Understand the big changes in our life.
Play peek-a-boo with me	Learn that people disappear and then come back again.
Express your feelings in positive ways (e.g., "I'm feeling sad about Mommy leaving soon. How are you feeling? What do you think you and I can do to make ourselves feel better?")	Know it is OK to feel sad/upset/angry.
Give me dolls, puppets, and dress-ups, and play pretend with me	Express my feelings in my play.
Give me play dough to roll and pound, and crayons and markers to draw with	Express my feelings in my play.
Give me words for what I am feeling and set clear limits (e.g., "I'm sorry you're feeling so upset right now. I know it's been hard getting ready for Daddy's trip. It's OK to feel mad/sad, but it's not OK to throw your toy at me. Let's take a break from playing and go take a walk together.")	Feel understood. Know it is OK to feel what I feel. Learn ways to manage my feelings.
Ask family and friends not to discuss scary events around me	Know I can depend on you when I am feeling out of control. To not be overwhelmed and upset by things I cannot understand.
Turn off the TV news	To not be frightened by what I feel and see. You have more time to pay attention to me. Let's play! (You can watch the news when I go to bed if it helps you feel better.)

Resources for Families

MilitaryHOMEFRONT: www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil is the official Department of Defense Website for reliable quality of life information designed to help troops and their families, leaders, and service providers.

Military OneSource: www.militaryonesource.com is available 24/7 to connect families with services, including car repair, money management, child care, spouse employment, counseling, and relocation. Or call 1-800-342-9647.

ZERO TO THREE: www.zerotothree.org offers a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military

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This brochure is based in part on information and insights from the following works:

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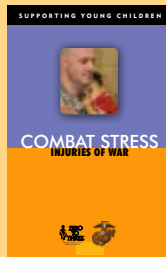
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