

**“I Know That Something Is About to Happen.
Will I Be All Right?”**

Helping Your Child Prepare for a Parent's Deployment

The days, weeks, or months leading up to deployment can be very hard for military families, including young children. Babies and toddlers may not understand the specifics of the upcoming separation, but they can sense increased stress in their homes. Because babies and toddlers don't often ask questions to make sense of the situation, they may feel even more vulnerable and confused.

Parents and other caregivers can assist their babies and toddlers by offering reassurance. Young children need to know that their caregivers will keep them physically and emotionally safe. Babies and toddlers often feel overwhelmed by their feelings and look to caregivers to help them manage these strong emotions. Caregivers who remain calm and attend to their children's needs help create a sense of security. A toddler in the midst of a full-blown tantrum, for example, may be feeling anxious and frustrated by family events. A caregiver might say, “I'm sorry you're feeling so upset right now. I know it's hard getting ready for Daddy's trip. It's OK to feel

mad/sad, but it's not OK to throw your toy. Let's take a break from playing and take a walk together.”

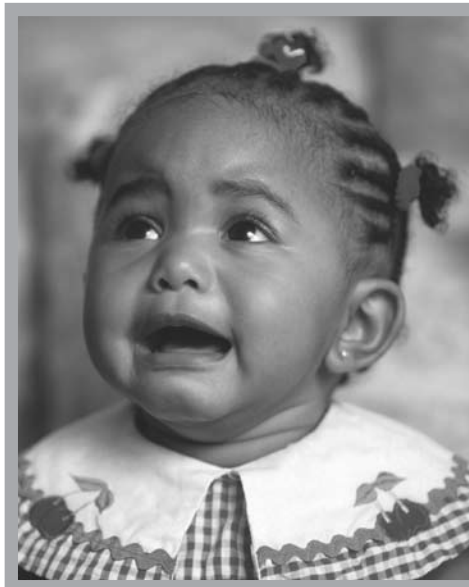
Prior to deployment, caregivers can focus on managing their own emotions as well. Parents who find supportive people, such as a counselor or trusted friend, have

someone to whom they can vent some of their strongest feelings. By talking through these intense emotions, caregivers are more able to focus on their children's needs.

Parents can also model for their children how to express feelings in a healthy way. On a difficult day, for example, a parent may say to his toddler, “I'm sorry I don't seem very fun today. I'm feeling a little sad about Mommy leaving soon.

How are you feeling? What do you think you and I can do to make ourselves feel better?” Very young children can learn it is OK for the adults around them to feel sad/upset/angry, as long as caregivers handle their feelings in a way that doesn't seem scary or upsetting.

During this time, caregivers can also



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work at becoming more in tune with their young children's thoughts and feelings. A young child might seem more whiny and clingy in the days or weeks following the active duty parent's departure. A parent who understands this is the child's way of saying, "I don't know where my Daddy is, and I'm afraid you'll go away too," is far more likely to respond in a loving and reassuring manner.

Caregivers can also provide reassurance and encourage openness. Babies may not understand why everybody seems stressed but will understand the extra hugs, reading time, or lullabies that help ease the tension. Toddlers may be surprisingly capable of understanding a simple explanation of the coming events. Young children often understand more than we realize. Parents can briefly describe the upcoming deployment and encourage follow-up talks. For example, a parent might say "I need to go on a very long work trip. I love you very much and wish I could stay here with you. I will miss you and write you as often as I can until I see you again. Please come talk to Daddy or me (or another trusted caregiver) if you have any questions."

Remember that mission readiness includes family preparedness. It can be very helpful when parents and caregivers gear up for deployment by seeking information, resources, and emotional support. Whether at home or deployed, military parents can take advantage of the support that is available to them, including counseling services, playgroups, spiritual organizations, parenting education resources and child-care agencies. Seeking support benefits caregivers and children by decreasing stress and increasing the likelihood of a successful transition. Contact your installation Family Center or Military OneSource at 1-800-342-9647 for support and referral.

ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit whose mission is to support the healthy development and well-being of infants, toddlers, and their families. For more information on ways to support you and your young children visit our Web site at: www.zerotothree.org/military

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