

# Little Listeners in an Uncertain World:

Coping strategies for you and your child  
during deployment or when a crisis occurs



National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families



## Our world has changed. How are **you** handling it?

### Tune into yourself

Military service presents special challenges for families. Feelings of worry and insecurity as well as other strong emotions in reaction to deployment and other stresses may surface. The following are some changes you may be experiencing:

- ▶ Sleep difficulties, like middle-of-the-night awakenings and nightmares.
- ▶ Changes in eating habits, such as loss of appetite or overeating.
- ▶ Irritability, emotional outbursts, and crying.
- ▶ Resentment and/or anger about deployment.
- ▶ Lack of energy and decreased pleasure in daily living.
- ▶ The feeling that you have little control over your life.
- ▶ Anxiety about living without the military family member.
- ▶ A generalized sense of fear and anxiety about the safety of the family member.

All Americans are grappling with a world changed by terrorism and war. But these are especially difficult times for military families who feel tremendous responsibility in trying to ensure that their children are cared for during potential and prolonged deployments. When you're anxious, your child often senses it. The first step in taking care of your child is taking care of yourself.

### What you can do

You may find yourself feeling nervous, moody, or blue. When you are tuned into your feelings and needs, there are many ways you can nurture yourself. For example:

- ▶ Stay connected. Keep in close touch with family and friends. Share your feelings, fears, and concerns.
- ▶ Maintain your daily routine as best you can.
- ▶ Make time for the things you enjoy.
- ▶ Turn off the TV and radio if they are making you anxious.
- ▶ Rest, exercise, and try to eat regular, balanced meals.
- ▶ Enjoy your child. Delight in the everyday moments that bring you both joy.
- ▶ Connect with your Family Readiness Group or unit to receive the most up-to-date and accurate information about deployment.
- ▶ Consider talking to a trusted health professional or seeking other professional help if you have further questions or need more support.

**When you're worried,  
your child knows it.**



# During difficult times, how is your **child** coping?

**H**ow much are young children affected by events that take place around them? A lot. For example, young children may not understand why their parent is gone. Although young children are often not able to voice their emotions, they feel the loss of the parent in their lives. They also absorb the images that surround them and are deeply affected by the emotions of the people they rely on for love and security.

There's nothing "simple" about childhood. Young children are complex human beings who react to situations in different ways, depending on their age, stage of development and temperament. While you may not understand exactly why your child acts as she does, your sensitive response can help your child cope during a difficult time.



**They take it all in: the bad and the good.**

## Behaviors you might see

- ▶ Increased clinginess, crying, and whining.
- ▶ Greater fear of separation from parents or primary guardian.
- ▶ Increase in aggressive behavior.
- ▶ More withdrawn and harder to engage.
- ▶ Play that acts out scary events.
- ▶ Changes in sleeping and eating patterns.
- ▶ More easily frustrated and harder to comfort.
- ▶ A return to earlier behaviors, like frequent nighttime awakenings and thumb sucking.



## Helping your child cope

When a family member deploys, it can be a very emotionally straining time for the whole family. During a time of military conflict, this strain can feel overwhelming, especially with the constant news coverage. Babies and toddlers do not need to be told about war or other events they have no way of understanding. Keep the following in mind:

- ▶ Maintain a regular routine with your child.
- ▶ Turn off TV and radio news reports; don't leave newspapers with disturbing images lying around.
- ▶ Ask friends and family members not to discuss scary events around your child.
- ▶ Respond to your child's need for increased attention, comfort, and reassurance. This will make him feel safer sooner.
- ▶ Pay close attention to your child's feelings and validate them. Ignoring feelings does not make them go away.
- ▶ Help your child identify her feelings by naming them, i.e., "scared," "sad," "angry."
- ▶ Offer your child safe ways to express feelings, such as drawing, pretend play, or telling stories.
- ▶ Don't discourage your child's play because you find it disturbing. Many young children work through frightening events by reenacting them in play. If your child seems to be distressed by his play, comfort him and offer another activity.
- ▶ Be patient and calm when your child is clingy, whiny, and aggressive. He needs you to help him regain control and feel safe.
- ▶ Answer children's questions according to their level of understanding: "Yes, your daddy is going to be gone for awhile, but he and I both love you very much."



## Our world has changed. But the joy of parenting prevails.

**P**roviding your child with sensitive and responsive care takes a lot of emotional and physical energy. But the everyday moments you share with your child can be healing for both of you. Do things together that feel good:

- ▶ Laugh and be silly together.
- ▶ Read your favorite stories.
- ▶ Listen to music and sing along.
- ▶ Take walks and enjoy new discoveries.
- ▶ Enjoy the warmth of cuddling close.
- ▶ Plan special outings like a picnic in the park, a trip to the zoo or a visit to a friend.

This shared joy, and the sense of fulfillment that comes from it, can ease the burden and provide an important foundation for coping during these difficult times.

### For more information

For an in-depth exploration of the ideas addressed in this brochure, please visit the ZERO TO THREE Web site at [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org). You will find additional information and links to resources.

**Finding  
comfort in  
each other's  
presence.**



Dear Parents:


As we all know, these turbulent times of terrorism and war pose a constant threat to ourselves and our loved ones. As a nation, we are fortunate to have troops that have bravely volunteered to serve in order to ensure our children's safety. Nevertheless, a service member's absence inevitably puts strain on the family members back home, particularly the youngest. For this reason, just as service members struggle to protect their country, parents must take extraordinary care to help children cope with the absence of a loved one.

One way to help them is to use *Little Listeners* as a guidebook. As emphasized throughout this brochure, very young children respond in complex ways to stressful environments. *Little Listeners* provides useful reminders and suggestions about simple but effective ways in which parents can nurture their young children during times of prolonged deployment and crisis.

This objective of fostering the well-being of children, families, and youth is a top priority for the Department of Defense. As you read and refer back to this brochure, we hope you find information that will support the young children in your family. In addition, please take advantage of the support services offered by the many agencies and individuals in your community that support military families like yours.

We appreciate your consideration and we thank you for the opportunity to bring additional love and support to your little listener's life.

Sincerely,



Barbara Thompson

Director, Office of Family Policy/Children and Youth

Military Community and Family Policy

Office of the Secretary of Defense

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