

**“I miss my Mommy/Daddy. I know you’re sad too,  
but can I count on you while she/he is away?”**

# Supporting Your Child While a Parent Is Deployed

**D**eployment can take a heavy toll on military families. As parents of young children cope with their own feelings, it is easy for them to lose sight of what their babies or toddlers may be experiencing. Although often unable to express themselves well, babies and toddlers do miss the active duty parent and need help getting through this difficult time.

Even the youngest baby can miss her deployed parent. The earliest years have so much to do with making positive bonds and building trust. Very young children are wired to seek close and trusting relationships with their caregivers. Through everyday routines such as reading books, changing diapers, feeding, cuddling, and soothing, parents provide experiences that build bonds. When the deployed parent leaves, so do some of these sources of comfort. Fortunately, the remaining caregiver can help ease this loss by continuing to offer loving activities and routines.

Caregivers can be supportive during deployments simply by understanding how

young children’s emotions and behaviors are connected. Young children who are missing their parent might show changes in behavior, including regression (a return to earlier behaviors, such as thumb sucking), clinginess, sleep difficulties, aggression, and/or other challenging behaviors. Caregivers who recognize that young children often communicate their feelings through their behaviors may be more likely to respond with empathy and patience, rather than with frustration and anger.



It is important for babies and toddlers to stay connected with the active duty parent as much as possible during deployment. A young child needs to know that his parent remains an important part of the family and that he is held in his parent’s heart and mind. This can be communicated in so many different ways! For example, letters, photos, and artwork can be exchanged and celebrated throughout the deployment. These things can be placed in albums or other special places, available to a young child to explore before and after the parent’s return. The remaining caregiver can share memories of the deployed parent,

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including times that the parent spent with the young child. These stories can paint a vivid and loving picture of the deployed parent and the special role that parent played, and continues to play, in the child's life.

There are many other activities that can help keep family members feel connected. Prior to deployment, the active duty parent can videotape himself or herself reading books and/or singing songs. The videotape can be played daily, even becoming a part of the bedtime routine. Pictures of the deployed parent can be hung on the wall, refrigerator, or even given to the child for them to carry around, kiss, or talk to every day. Young children can get a "kiss" from the deployed parent every night by grabbing a Hershey's chocolate out of a big bowl. These kinds of experiences can become their own comforting routines and rituals.

During a combat deployment, family members may be understandably anxious about the active duty parent's safety and turn to news coverage for information. It's important that caregivers are sensitive to the impact that news media images may have on children, even babies and toddlers. Very young children can feel distressed and confused, both by the sights and sounds coming from the television and by their caregivers' reactions. Caregivers who are too focused on the media coverage may become upset or not as attuned to the needs of their young children. It is important that families have access to direct and reliable sources of

information, such as command-sponsored spouse organizations, whose representatives will be available to address their fears and concerns. Caregivers can then focus their energy and attention, not on the television but on establishing a relaxed and nurturing home for themselves and their children.

The deployment stage can be exhausting, and it is important for parents and caregivers to find ways to be good to themselves. By nurturing themselves, they have a greater capacity to care for their babies and toddlers. Families are encouraged to seek support through relatives, friends, and community agencies. Counseling services, playgroups, spiritual organizations, parenting education services, and child-care agencies are often readily available to military families, both on and off installation. 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](http://www.zerotothree.org/military)

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