The "So Far" Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope with the Deployment of a Parent in the Military Reserves

SOFAR

Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists

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1. Introduction

Children whose parents are in the military reserves face special challenges related to deployment of their parent. While the feelings they experience are in some ways much like those of other children who become separated from a parent, they also confront obstacles that are unique to their situation. For example, their experience of separation can be felt in relative isolation. Most children they know never have to deal with such a drastic separation, and even children whose parents are in the regular military and who might have similar needs and problems are likely to receive ongoing support and understanding of a caring community sharing in the separation experience.

The attention and treatment these children receive before, during, and after deployment is critical. However, the effect of a parent's departure on the daily lives of these children often goes unrecognized or misunderstood. As a result, many children do not get the treatment or attention they need during this traumatic time. Even when their emotions and actions are identified as stemming from their parent's deployment, the attention the children receive can often be inadequate.

The response to a child dealing with the deployment of a parent must be carefully considered. While there is not one right way to address the situation, there are important elements to take into account that can help adults devise effective responses. For instance, the response must be particular to each individual child, because while there are common types of reactions to be on the look out for (e.g., anxiety, worry), there are reactions that are unique to each child. Also, a child's age, prior experiences, and level of development play a major role in how he or she expresses his or her feelings about the separation and in what kind of response is best.

Whatever children's reactions to the deployment of a parent, there is much the adults in their lives can do in the way of support. Learning how to recognize and respond to their problems and needs can make a vital difference in how the deployment will ultimately affect these children.

This brochure provides information to help you understand and support children throughout the deployment experience. The following are just some of the questions it will help you answer:

- What are a child's needs likely to be at various stages of deployment?
- What are some of the reactions that I should look for and what causes them?
- How does the age of a child affect the responses and needs that arise?
- How can I support this child before, during, and after this stressful time?

2. Background Information To Guide Your Efforts In Helping a Child Cope with the Deployment of a Parent [2]

Separation from a parent is very difficult for children of all ages. From playing peek-a-boo as a baby to saying "good-bye" to a parent on the first day of school, separation is one of the most basic developmental issues a child faces throughout his or her life. In the case of deployed Reservists, children experience a parent's departure for combat with feelings of intense loss. This is true no matter how hard the remaining parent or caretaker tries to maintain a sense of normalcy throughout the separation and reunification process. As a result, the child's feelings need to be acknowledged and addressed.

As children go through the various stages of the deployment, they will work to understand the many changes and feelings they experience. They will use what they know from prior experiences and what they absorb in their day-to-day lives, including conversations of the deployed parent and others, as well as news reports and images. Children manifest this process of coming to an understanding in different ways, which depending on the age can include play (especially when they are young), art and drawing, writing, and conversations with others.

[2] Adapted from *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times (2nd Ed.)* by Diane Levin. (Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003).

Throughout the deployment period, children will hear about the war or conflict through news reports and conversations with others. However much a parent attempts to shield a child from scenes of and conversations about the conflict, the child will absorb information about the events. They will often use this information as they struggle to make sense of the deployment of their own parent.

Trusted adults play a vital role in helping children feel safe while they work out their ideas and feelings. Maintaining a sense of order and predictability and responding to their questions, reactions, and concerns will positively influence their experience as well as their willingness to let you help them deal with the deployment.

There are no simple recipes for responding to the needs that a deployment creates in children. This is because the process of supporting the children is a continuous give-and-take that requires the adult to shape what he or she does based on the changing needs of the individual child.

Children will not experience or understand issues related to their parent's deployment in the same way adults do. They will devise their own meanings and conclusions from what they see and hear. A child's age, prior experiences, and individual temperament will affect greatly his or her reaction to the deployment. The more the adults can recognize and appreciate the child's perspective, the better they will be at helping him or her and matching what they do to the child's needs.

3. Overview of the Deployment Cycle [3]

There are 3 distinct stages in the cycle of deployment. It is important to distinguish them because different issues and needs can arise from each.

Pre-deployment Phase. During the pre-separation period, children experience stress and confusion that stem in large part from the stress they perceive in the adults. This is especially true for families that have not previously experienced the long-term absence of a parent. Some of the feelings that adults may feel are shock and disbelief, and children often sense the emotional strain these feelings cause. For the children, their order, security and safety are disrupted as the adults busy themselves with preparing for the realities of the pending departure and with worrying about what deployment means for daily life as well as for long-term plans and dreams. A child's age will affect his or her ability to comprehend the situation and the feelings associated with it—the younger the child, the more difficult it will be for him or her to understand why the parent is leaving or what it will be like when the parent leaves.

Deployment Phase. The focused efforts of preparing for deployment and the intense feelings about deployment day begin to fade, as the emotional impact of the absence of the deployed parent becomes real. Families are left to deal with feelings of loss, grief, and fear. The remaining caretaker struggles with his or her own grief while at the same time taking on new duties and routines. Many times during the course of a day children will experience the realities of the separation, the changed routines, and the loss of an essential relationship. Despite what we tell them about the reason for the deployment, many children especially young children may feel guilty thinking that is something that they did that resulted in their parent leaving them. As new routines and rituals are established, children begin to learn what life will be like without their deployed parent, and families gradually acclimate to the new situation and work towards a new sense of equilibrium. The sense of separation and loss remains a constant, however, as does the need to continue to provide special support for children.

[3] The material in this section was adapted from: Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope With Separation. U.S. Department of Defense; Working with Military Children: A Primer for School Personnel. Virginia Joint Military Services Board and the Military Child Education Child Coalition, 2001.

Reunification Phase. Reunion is typically met with initial feelings of extreme joy, but as the excitement fades it is often replaced with mixed emotions for everyone. While children feel happy about the safe return of their parent and parents are glad about the reunification with their family, they may both have trouble instantly reconnecting and feeling comfortable with each other. From the child's perspective, life has once again become disrupted as whatever adjustments were made to become accustomed to the new family reality during the deployment phase are disrupted. From the returning parent's point of view, things in the family should pick up where they left off when the deployment occurred. But it quickly becomes clear that things are not the same—for instance, children have become older and more competent and they have come to rely on the remaining parent for things the deployed parent used to do. From children's point of view, the relationship with the returning parent has to be updated to match who the child is now and what has happened since the parent has left. A major challenge for both the children and the parents is to establish some stability for the family with respect to routines, roles, and responsibilities. Although much about the home life can seem new or unfamiliar, stressors in relationships that existed before deployment can resurface and can come as a surprise given that

the family had awaited the reunion with such excitement. All of these potential issues will become more exaggerated in instances where the returning family member has been psychologically or physically wounded (in these situations, additional help will usually be needed). Being aware of and addressing the new as well as the old stresses is an important part of the reunification process.

4. How Age Affects a Child's Ability to Understand the Developments and Needs in Dealing with the Deployment [4]

Preschool Children

Understanding. Preschool children generally experience what is happening in terms of how it directly affects them. During the pre-deployment stage, they will not understand the full extent of the impending departure because the parent is still at home, but they will notice the disruption of routines or change in their parent's attitude to the extent it affects them. Once the parent actually leaves, the event takes on a greater meaning for them, as they actually experience the reality of no longer having their deployed parent there. During deployment, their experience of the separation is shaped primarily by the absence of their parent and by the change in routines. For instance, they will notice that they receive less attention, as one parent is no longer there and the other parent assumes the role of a single caretaker and all of the parenting and household management duties that come along with it. While the changes to their daily routine cause the greatest stress, they may also have questions about why their parent left and wonder if they are somehow to blame.

Needs. Preschool children need to know that they have a caring parent who will be there to take care of them, meet their needs, and keep them safe. Preschool children also need their daily rituals and routines to remain as much as possible as they were before the deployment.

[4] See footnote 2 and Little Listeners in an Uncertain World: Coping Strategies for You and Your Child during Deployment or When a Crisis Occurs. Zero to Three, Washington, D.C. 2003.

School-Age Children

Understanding. School-age children have a greater ability to reason and understand what is happening than their younger counterparts, but there is still much that they can not figure out on their own. This mid-level range of understanding can lead to confusion and mixed feelings. For instance, they may watch the news and understand a great deal about what is said, but they may automatically connect the images and the stories to their own parent, assuming the worst and unable to reason that their parent is not in danger (e.g., the parent being stationed at a location not near to where the event took place). In addition, they may feel sadness about whether the deployed parent will return, while at the same time feel anger about their parent leaving. Other worries and conflicting feelings arise from observing the remaining parent. If the remaining parent voices frustration or anger about the deployed parent being gone, they may worry that their parents will divorce, and as they see the remaining parent struggle, they may feel that it is their job to take on the role of an adult and help make the situation better.

Needs. Much like younger children, school-age children need to have routines maintained and know that the remaining parent will continue to care for them. They have additional needs as well – they need a trusted adult with whom they can talk safely about their questions and concerns, and they need to continue to feel connected to the deployed parent.

Adolescents

Understanding. Adolescents may have a reaction that seems similar to adult feelings about deployment, but they may also show signs of regressing to an earlier stage of development. They may withdraw from their family and become more heavily involved with their peers,

spending time with them to avoid feelings which are uncomfortable. In some instances, the teen may try to take on the role of the absent parent within the family. In others, they may misdirect their anger about the deployment toward the present caretaker or siblings. Teens vary in their openness and ability to direct and control their emotions. If a teen has difficulty prior to deployment, there is an increased likelihood that he or she will experience difficulty during the deployment stage.

Needs. The needs of adolescents are very similar to school-age children, although they have needs that are particular to their age group. The remaining parent should be sure to permit and respect time spent with peers while also setting aside extra individual time with the teen. Adults should closely monitor changes in the teen's behavior and friendships.

5. Common Reactions to Deployment

Preschool Children	
POSSIBLE FEELINGS	**POSSIBLE RESULTING BEHAVIORS**
⊙ Confusion ⊙ Surprise (e.g., surprise about everything feeling so different) ⊙ Guilt (e.g., guilt for causing the parent to leave)	⊙ Clinginess and increased demands for attention ⊙ Trouble separating from parent ⊙ Irritability ⊙ Aggression and angry outbursts ⊙ Attention-getting behavior (positive and negative) ⊙ A return to younger behavior (e.g., more thumb sucking, bedwetting) ⊙ Sleep disturbances ⊙ More easily frustrated/harder to comfort ⊙ Acting out scary events

Elementary Children	
POSSIBLE FEELINGS	**POSSIBLE RESULTING BEHAVIORS**
⊙ Same reactions as preschool children, plus . . . ⊙ Sadness (e.g., sadness about the lack of a sense of normalcy, the loss of the parent's presence) ⊙ Anger ⊙ Worry about deployed parent's return ⊙ Worry whether remaining parent will leave too	⊙ New behavior problems (or intensification of already existing problems) ⊙ Regression behaviors ⊙ Rapid mood swings (e.g., angry outbursts followed by clinging behavior) ⊙ Changes in eating and sleeping ⊙ Anger at both parents (for disrupting their normal way of life and sense of security)

Adolescents	
POSSIBLE FEELINGS	**POSSIBLE RESULTING BEHAVIORS**
⊙ Anger ⊙ Sadness ⊙ Depression ⊙ Anxiety ⊙ Fear	⊙ Misdirected anger (e.g., acting-out behaviors, intentionally hurting or cutting themselves) ⊙ School problems (e.g., sudden and/or unusual changes) ⊙ Appearance of apathy (e.g., loss of interest, non-communication, denial of feelings) ⊙ Significant weight loss ⊙ Possible drug or alcohol abuse ⊙ Regressive behavior (e.g., acting as if at an earlier stage of development) ⊙ Increased importance of friends

When to seek more help...

- If you would just like to talk about the experience or check out some of the steps you can take to meet the needs of your children
- If above behaviors become more extreme or last long after deployment or reunification has happened
- If you notice a disinterest in school, including a drop in grades, and increased negativity
- If you, or other family members at home, are increasingly anxious, worried, or overwhelmed by the experience and find it hard to support your child's emotional needs
- If at any time you are worried about your child's behavior

6. What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child through the Deployment

For Preschool and Elementary Children

- Help your child feel connected to the deployed family member.
  - Keep discussions about the deployed parent part of your regular family life—for instance, at mealtime mention that you are eating one of Daddy's favorite desserts or at bedtime say you are going to sing the song Mommy used to sing.
  - Write cards and letters.
  - Paint or draw pictures to send.
  - Have pictures of the deployed family member in prominent locations in the home.
- Protect children, especially younger children, as much as possible from seeing images of war and violence on television or in newspapers.
- Seek encouragement and support from extended family and friends.
- Ask family and friends not to talk about scary aspects of the deployment in front of your child.
- Maintain regular routines and schedules including meals, bedtime, and school pickup arrangements.

- Try to spend extra time with your child and respond to the need for increased attention, comfort, and reassurance. This can help restore his or her sense of safety.
- Encourage safe ways for your child to express feelings and work out ideas, such as dramatic play and art materials.
- If your child starts to play in scary or disturbing ways, try to keep the activity safe without discouraging it. Young children work through frightening things by acting them out in play.
- Create a scrapbook of daily happenings and special milestones to share with the deployed family member during reunification.

For middle school and teenaged children

- Encourage conversations about deployment and war. (E.g., "I know this is a tough time for you, and I am here for you. Feel free to talk with me at any time.")
- Monitor overexposure or excessive fascination with media coverage.
- Maintain routines.
- Protect both study and relaxation time.
- Do not expect the teenager to act as a co-parent.
- Do not change rules or consequences.
- Monitor adult conversation.
- Balance the teen's need for more time with peers and extra

time with the remaining parent.

- Be patient and calm in the face of increased irritability and withdrawal. Extra support or physical affection can help.
- Encourage teens to get rest, exercise, and eat appropriately. Watch for changes in sleep patterns, activity level, and eating habits.
- Encourage teens to express thoughts and feelings by keeping a diary or journal.
- Encourage teens to continue community and extracurricular activities.
- Help teens remain connected to the deployed family member.

7. Talking With Your Child About Deployment and War [5, 6]

For Preschool and Elementary Children

- Be open to conversations about the deployed parent and war. Children need to know they have someone with whom it is safe to talk about the thoughts, questions, and worries they have about their parent's deployment or what they hear about war and the military in the news. How you respond will let them know whether it is okay to come to you in the future.
- Base what you say on the age, understandings, and concerns of the children.
- Young children will not understand war or why grown-ups fight. When they hear about a scary situation, they often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. They also tend to focus on one thought at a time and on the most salient aspects of a situation. Because they do not have the ability to practice logical, causal thinking, it is hard for them to figure out what happened and why or to sort out what is pretend and real. They relate what they hear to what they already know which in turn can lead to misunderstandings. For example, a child may think: "There was a plane crash. Daddy flies in a plane. Did daddy die?"

[5] Adapted from *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times (2nd Ed.)* by Diane Levin. (Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003).
[6] For more assistance see: The PBS Parents Guide on Talking to Kids about War and Violence (www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/war).

- Older children think about what underlies an event and possible real world implications of what they hear. They use more precise language and use logical and causal thinking. They still cannot, however, understand and explain all of what they hear, and as a result they can still develop misunderstandings and fears. Understand exactly what they mean by the words they use and base your responses on what they seem to know and to be asking.

- Before responding, start by finding out what the child knows. When a child asks a question or raises an issue, ask, "What have you heard about that?" If you initiate a conversation, start with, "Have you heard anything about a plane crash? What did you hear?"

- Answer questions and clear up misconceptions that worry or confuse your children. You do not need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they seem to want to know: "Yes, your mommy is going to be gone for a while, but she and I both love you very much." Do not worry about giving "right answers" or if children have ideas that do not correspond with yours (e.g., anger at the deployed parent). You can calmly voice your own feelings, such as sadness, concern, and hope. If your child asks if the deployed parent might die, try to focus your response on what is being done to keep "daddy" or "mommy" safe.

For middle-school-age children and teenagers

- Be open to conversations about the deployed parent and war. Make sure that your child/teen has a trusted adult with whom he or she can speak. (Remember that your teen may not feel comfortable speaking with you.)

- Find out what concerns your child/teen might have about the deployed parent or war. Assure your child/teen about what is known and the risks.

- Encourage your child/teen to write about his or her parent and speak to an adult who may have had a similar experience.

8. What Schools Can Do To Support Children & Families Dealing with the Deployment of a Parent [7]

Schools have a vital role to play in helping children whose parents have been deployed into active service.

Strategies applicable to children of all ages:

Make a special effort to stay connected with the remaining parent.

- School personnel may need to raise the issue of deployment with the parent. Parents may not address the issue themselves because of their own stresses or ambivalent feelings or because they are not sure how the school can be of help.
- Get information from the parent about how the child is coping or other related issues that may arise.
- Where relevant, discuss how you can develop and coordinate responses that will help the child cope and deal with stressors.
- Agree to keep in touch about how the child is doing and if any changes occur.

[7] Working with Military Children: A Primer for School Personnel. Virginia Joint Military Services Board and the Military Child Education Child Coalition, 2001.

Make a special effort to stay connected with the child whose parent is deployed.

- Let the child know it is okay to talk about the situation with you. Acknowledge the situation and establish channels of communication with the child.
- As appropriate, help the child talk to classmates about the deployed parent so that the other students know about the situation and feel they can talk about it.

Watch for signs of stress, such as bursts of anger, lowered school performance, or distractibility.

- Try to provide extra support when there are signs of stress and when there are situations that may cause stress.
- Talk about the stressor(s) with the child and help the child find ways to cope and succeed in the problem area(s).

Give the child avenues for expressing his or her feelings and working through issues related to the deployment.

- Art, play, and writing can provide opportunities for children to express and process their emotions.
- Help the child write letters to the deployed parent or assist them in finding other ways to communicate.

Strategies applicable to middle-school-age children and teenagers

Increase communication with the parent in order to be better equipped to monitor the child for signs such as:

- Change in school performance or attitude toward school
- Drop in attendance
- Change in friendship patterns

Assist parents in identifying outside supports if warning signs persist over time.

Make a special effort to stay connected with the student.

Encourage the student to participate in school and extracurricular activities.

Provide a venue for communication with the student, including

- Individual and small group counseling in school
- Adult mentor/critical friend/support group
- Referral to outside /community support when problems arise
- Participation in exercise and/or writing outlets such as poetry or journal writing

9. Guide For Pediatricians That Treat Children Whose Parents Have Been Deployed into the Active Reserves

- Acknowledge the deployment and provide the child with an opportunity to respond.
- Offer reassurance to whether or not the child raises any issues.
- Provide guidance to parents on helping children and encourage parents to maintain usual activities and to be honest with their feelings as they interact with their children.
- Refer parents to resources that can help them better understand their child's situation and needs.
- As seems needed, refer the parent to support/counseling/mental health services:

    1. Any child with significant or marked distress that is overwhelming or causing significant parental concern
    2. Any child that has stress reactions (i.e., PTSD) lasting more than one month
    3. Any parent who would like guidance and support and wishes a referral

Resources for Pediatricians

Psychosocial Implications of Disaster or Terrorism on Children: A Guide for the Pediatrician, Joseph F. Hagan, Jr, MD and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health and the

Task Force on Terrorism, Pediatrics 2005;116: 787-795

The AAP disaster-preparedness Web page (www.aap.org/terrorism) includes up-to-date listings on all aspects of disaster preparedness for children, including their psychological needs.

The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence of the Yale Child Study Center (www.nccev.org) includes disaster-specific data. For advice dealing with the behavioral needs of children, consult the following sources:

- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Primary Care (DSM-PC) Child and Adolescent Version;
- Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health, Volumes I and II; and
- Feelings Need Checkups Too (CD-ROM available from the AAP at www.aap.org/profed/childrencheckup.htm).

10. Outside Resources for Children Whose Parents Have Been Deployed

- Pediatrician (as a first step). (See above guidance to pediatricians.)
- Community centers for teens and youth
- Social services
- School
- Religious Affiliation
- Family members and friends

Helpful resources and links for parents:

http://www.militarychild.org/911-links.cfm

http://www.hooah4health.com/environment/deployment/emotionalcycle.htm

www.zerotothree.org

www.guardfamily.org

www.guardfamilyyouth.org

www.defenselingk.mil/ra/ (click on "Family Readiness")

www.aap.org (American Academy of Pediatrics. Click on Children's Health topics > Children and Disasters and Behavioral and Mental Health)

www.aap.org/terrorism

Resources

In preparing this guide we relied heavily on the following resources:

Guide for Helping Children and Youth Cope with Separation. U.S. Department of Defense.

Teaching Young Children in Violent Times (2nd edition) by Diane Levin. Educators for Social Responsibility, Cambridge, Mass. and National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, DC. (2003).

Little Listeners in an Uncertain World: Coping Strategies for You and Your Child During Deployment or When a Crisis Occurs. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.

Parents Guide to the Military Child During Deployment and Reunion. Document sponsored by the Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense. (Downloaded from the Internet.)

Working with Military Children: A Primer for School Personnel. Virginia Joint Military family Services Board *and* Military Child Education Coalition.

SOFAR: (Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists)
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