

CHILDREN AND SEPARATION

Separation from a parent is stressful for a child. We need to expect reactions to that stress. Those reactions will differ among children. The following are some examples of what you might expect:

Infants (Birth – 12 months):

- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- May want to be held more.
- May seem “fussier.”

Toddlers (Ages 1 – 3 years):

- Show regression in walking or potty training.
- Cry for no apparent reason.
- Whine and cling to you.

Pre-Schoolers/Kindergarten Age:

- Clinging to people or favorite toy/blanket.
- Unexplained crying or tearfulness.
- Increased acts of anger or frustration.
- Sleep difficulties, nightmares, frequent waking.
- Worry about the safety of everyone.
- Eating difficulties.
- Fear of new people or situations.

School Age:

- Change in school performance.
- Increase in complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other illnesses when nothing physically seems to be wrong.
- More irritable or crabby.
- Fascinated with the military and news about it.
- Worry about family and finances.

Adolescents:

- Any of the above signs listed.
- Acting out behaviors (getting into trouble at school, at home, or with the law).
- Low self-esteem and self-criticism.
- Misdirected anger.
- Loss of interest in usual hobbies or activities.

Children Who Cope Well With Separation Often Have:

- A good relationship with parents.
- A strong sense of self-worth or self-confidence.
- An understanding of parent’s job and why it is important for them to go on deployment.
- Dependable communication between deployed parent and family.
- An adult who will listen and talk to them.

Kids are all different and adjust to deployment in different ways and at different rates. It is important that parents normalize these reactions to separation and stress. Stress-related behaviors lasting longer than a month may need further investigation. You could talk to other parents, talk to teachers, attend a parenting class, or seek counseling.



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CHILDREN & DEPLOYMENT

Fleet and Family
Support Centers
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A deployment can be emotionally challenging for those left behind, especially children. Although children's reactions will vary with their personalities, ages, and coping skills, changes as dramatic as deployments will normally be puzzling to all children. Parents wonder how the separation will affect their children and what their roles as parents will be in assisting children through this time.

Common Concerns For Parents:

- Will we lose touch with one another?
- Will the children remember the deployed parent?
- How will I handle the added responsibility alone?
- How will the children cope with the separation?
- Can I still be a good parent while I'm gone?

The Positive Aspects of Deployment:

- Independence and self-confidence grow for all.
- Parent/child relationship at home is strengthened.
- Deployed parent/child relationship can grow through cards, letters, emails, phone calls, packages, etc.
- Family relationship is enhanced through planning and flexibility.

BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

Suggestions For Deploying Parent:

- Tell children when you'll be leaving, for how long, and about when you should return.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Discuss and accept their feelings.
- Spend time with each child individually before you go.
- Give the kids a tour of the ship, including where you work, eat, sleep, etc.
- Ask your children to assist you with packing.
- Visit school before deployment and talk to the teacher(s); stay involved by leaving envelopes to be mailed to you with school work, etc. Encourage them to contact you via email if possible.
- Give each child a comfort item — something of yours such as a t-shirt, ball cap, or pillowcase.
- Leave small gifts, cards, etc., with other parent to be given to kids throughout the deployment.

Suggestions For Parent At Home:

- Ensure that each child is left with a photo of the deploying parent and him or herself.
- Have children prepare a care package for deploying parent that can be opened after the ship leaves.
- Establish rules/limits before the deployment.
- Record (video or audio) deploying parent reading bedtime stories or other activities with children.
- Plan fun activities to do as a family during the deployment.
- Plant some seeds and talk about how much they may grow during the deployment.

DURING THE DEPLOYMENT

Ideas For Deploying Parent:

- Remember birthdays and other special occasions with letters, email, cards, or small gifts.
- Send younger children colorful postcards or pictures you have drawn.
- Cassette or video tapes can be used to send children messages or read them a story.
- Be sure to write each child individually; use stationery, stickers, etc., that appeal to the varying age groups.
- Play games through the mail, such as tic-tac-toe or hangman.

Ideas For Parent At Home:

- Try to keep household routine/rules the same.
- Resist saying, "Wait till your father/mother hears about this!"
- Help children keep track of time by using a diary, calendar, paper chain, jelly beans in a jar, etc.
- Encourage child to send their own letters, email, tapes, and pictures.
- Tape conversations with children as they arrive home from school or while they're playing or eating dinner.
- Encourage children to express feelings of anger safely.
- Have children do special jobs — track the deployed parent's favorite sports team or TV show.
- Talk about the deployed parent in daily conversation — think of ways to keep the connection with him/her.
- Let your children know that it's OK to be sad, but teach them how to recover and move on.
- Post a large world map and help the children track the ship.