

Deployment and Kids

Goals for adults:

- Help children feel safe
- Help children understand what is going on factually
- Help children understand how the parent's deployment will impact their life
- Help children handle their emotional reactions

The degree to which children are affected by deployment of a parent will vary depending on the child's age, developmental level, previous life experiences, and the reactions/emotions modeled by the adults in the child's life.

Emotional responses that may occur:

Fear for the safety of himself/herself and of the parent that has been deployed

Loss of control to change current situation

Anger about the situation or at the parent for leaving

Loss of stability created by the interruption of routines, schedules and activities

Confusion about war and violence, and the future

What to Do:

- Inform school personnel if a parent is deployed. Tell the child's teacher if behavior changes/difficulties are being exhibited at home since the deployment.
- Know that the school is a source of support for you and your child. School personnel know and care about the impact of deployment on families. Teachers have training on and experience with deployment related issues. Deployment counseling support groups are available in the school. The structure and routine of schools provides much stability for a child who may feel like his life is out of control.
- Volunteer to go into the classroom to talk about your military job and how your skills contribute to the safety of the world.
- Limit exposure to media coverage of violence. Graphic images can cause nightmares, create confusion and may awaken other fears and anxieties.
- Model calm and in-control behavior
- Reassure your child about his/her safety. Tell them that the concerns are real and serious, and that is why the government is taking steps to make the world a safer place, why there are more security checks on base and at airports. Remind them that their parent is well trained in their military duties, that our military is very powerful and many other countries are helping us. Express hope and faith that things will be okay, and that while there may be deaths, their parent is likely to be fine.
- Reassure the child that there will always be someone to take care of him/her.
- Recognize the feeling that is probably behind the child's actions/behavior and put it into words. For example, "I can see you are feeling really scared about this," or "It is hard to have dad away from the family." Remind the child to use their words rather than actions to express their feelings and solve problems.

- Listen to your child. Validate their feelings. Let him know that you understand that what is happening in Iraq is confusing and complicated. Be prepared to answer questions. Find out what child already knows before you answer questions. This allows you to provide honest information that is reassuring without it being the whole truth as you see it. For example, if the child asks, “Is a bomb going to drop on us?” you would say, “What do you know about bombs?” When you don’t know what to say, give a hug. Put fears into perspective as to what is realistic. Allow children to express their own opinions.
- Seize the opportunity to talk about the child’s feelings and fears if they come out in play, drawings or writings. Gently redirect children away from violent play, but don’t be overly disapproving unless the play is genuinely aggressive.
- Express your own feelings of grief and horror about what happens in war. Acknowledge that the loss of any life is sad. This is a good way to help children learn compassion and empathy.
- Help older children clarify beliefs about war and the role of the United States in this conflict. Help pre-empt racism and stereotypes.
- Maintain family routines and schedules, and consistent expectations for behavior. Don’t change the family rules. Keep your bedtime schedules but be flexible about nightlights, comfort toys and siblings sharing a room.
- Maintain contact between the absent parent and the child as much as possible. Keep a record of events to share with the parent when he/she returns. Children as young as Kindergarten know about journal writing. Before deployment, tape record stories or greetings to be shared with the child periodically during the absence.
- Understand that some behaviors will be normal reactions to the absence of the parent and uncertainty of this situation. There may be signs of stress, regression, oppositional behaviors, or aggression. If reactions are extreme/severe, if the child displays signs of suicidal thinking, talk or actions, or the child seems obsessed with violent thoughts for more than a few days, take your child to the mental health clinic.
- Schedule special activities: gatherings with other families with a deployed parent, making cookies for security guards, collecting magazines for the USO, etc.
- Ask your spiritual leader how to talk to your child about death and killing.
- Use your local support services.
- Take time for yourself. You will be more available for your children if you are managing your own stress and reactions.

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Sources of information: “Talking with Children about War-Pointers for Parents” by Alvin Poussaint, M.D. and Susan Linn, Ed.D.; “Children and Fear of War and Terrorism” by the National Association of School Psychologists; “The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective” by LTC Simon H. Pincus, USA, MC, COL Robert House, USAR, MC, LTC Joseph Christenson, USA, MC, and CAPT Lawrence E. Adler, MC, USNR-R