

The  
"SO FAR" Guide  
for Helping  
Children and Youth  
Cope with the Deployment  
and Return of a Parent  
in the National Guard  
and Other Reserve  
Components



Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists



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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

**C**HILDREN WHOSE PARENTS ARE IN THE ARMY or Air National Guard or serve in one of the other Reserve Components (Army Reserve, Air Force Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, or Navy Reserve) often face special challenges related to the deployment and return of their parent. Like all military children, they experience the stress of lengthy separation when their parent deploys for military duty and they encounter the related challenge of reunion when their military parent returns. Unlike children of active component service members, these children typically confront these separation and reunion experiences in relative isolation. Unlike the children of active duty members who often live in military and civilian communities oriented to these military family life challenges, the children of our National Guard and other Reservists typically live in civilian communities with limited awareness and very little understanding of the challenges of military service or military family life, especially what it means to have a parent go off to war.

The attention and caring these children receive before, during, and after deployment is critical. However, the effect of a parent's departure and return on the daily lives

of these children often goes unrecognized or misunderstood. As a result, many of these children do not get the attention and support they need during this traumatic time. Even when their emotions and actions are identified as stemming from their parent's deployment, the attention these children receive is often inadequate. Even upon return when everyone expects the difficulties to be over, military families, especially Guard and reserve families, usually still have a lot of work to do.

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 lookout for (e.g., anxiety, worry), there are reactions that are unique to each child. A child's age, prior experiences, and level of development play a major role in how feelings are expressed about the separation and in what kind of response is best. Also a child's responses will vary at different stages of development and based on what happens before, during and after the parents' departure.

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 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. In another section, this brochure will also address issues around the parent's return. 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?

## CHAPTER 2

# Background Information to Guide Your Efforts in Helping a Child Cope with the Deployment of a Parent <sup>2</sup>

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 challenges a child faces throughout his or her life. In the case of deployed Guard and other Reservists, children experience a parent’s deployment 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 needs and feelings should 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 their prior experiences and what they absorb in their day-to-day lives, including conversations

**“There are no simple recipes for responding to the needs that a deployment creates in children.”**

between 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 and stage of development, can include play (especially when they are young), art and drawing, writing, and conversations with others.

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

deployment of their own parent. The more the Guard Member or Reservist has talked with their child and reassured them before they leave, the better the child is likely to cope during the deployment. It may not be possible to completely prevent a child from exposure to news coverage of the present conflicts, but parents are urged to actively avoid any news shows about the war or reports that could be frightening. Instead, reassure the child that he/she is not in danger and that the military parent will return safely from the deployment. While there is no 100% guarantee that the parent will return unharmed, it is not helpful for parents to give their children frightening information about which the child is powerless to affect. If children are given suggestions that their parent could be harmed or killed, they may become very fearful, even if the parents later try to reassure them.

Trusted adults play a vital role in helping children feel safe. Maintaining a sense of order and predictability and responding to their questions, reactions, and concerns will positively influence the child's experience, as well as their willingness to let the caring adult help them deal with the deployment. Additionally, the military parent can help the child have mastery experiences by allowing their child to assist with age appropriate tasks that are related to deployment preparations.

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 caring 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 parents' 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 adults can recognize and appreciate the child's perspective, the better they will be at helping the child and the more successful they will be in matching what they do to the child's needs.



## CHAPTER 3

# Overview of the Deployment Cycle <sup>3</sup>

THERE ARE SEVERAL STAGES in the cycle of deployment. It is important to distinguish them because different issues and needs can arise from each.

**Early Pre-Deployment Phase.** During the early 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. Even though they understand that deployments are now a reality for all military members, some Guard and Reservists may still experience a sense of shock and disbelief when they receive a deployment notification. Children typically sense their parents' emotional distress and as a result experience their own emotional strain. 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. The Guard member or Reservist may have to leave for weeks to months for training before the deployment. So at a time when spouses and children yearn for more time from the Reservist, s/he is less available. During such training times, it is helpful for parents to plan some specific family activities. The memories of these family activities can help to sustain the child emotionally during the deployment.

**Pre-Deployment Final Weeks.** The last week(s) before deployment warrant separate attention because there may be a dramatic shift in the emotions of both parents. The Guard member and Reservist needs to emotionally separate

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<sup>3</sup> 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 Coalition, 2001.





from home life in order to shift their focus to the military mission. He/she must be fully focused on mission accomplishment and safety from the moment they arrive in the combat zone. To the Guard member or Reservist this time can feel like they are being torn in two different directions. But this shift of attention away from the family, normal as it is, can seem to children like abandonment. Children may fear that their parent doesn't love them, or that they have done something that made their parent angry with them. It is completely normal for younger children to see the world as revolving around them. So if their parent seems

distant they may assume they did something to drive their parent away. If these issues are ignored by parents, children could assume that the parent was actually leaving because of something the child did.

The parent remaining at home may have very conflicting emotions in the last weeks before their spouse leaves. They may feel even more needy for attention from their deploying spouse and at times they may also wish the waiting was over. Some of this tension normally goes away once the Guard member or Reservist leaves and the family can now focus on establishing a new routine. It is important that both parents understand that this tension in the final weeks before the deployment is a typical part of the deployment cycle so that they don't over interpret the changes in behavior.

**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 may struggle with his or her own grief while at the same time taking on new duties and routines in the family. 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 children about the reason for the deployment, many children (especially young children) may feel guilty and think that was 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 hopefully gradually acclimate to the new situation and they work as a family to establish 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.

Some families create a “countdown calendar” where they cross off the days as the deployment goes along. If the parent at home decides to do this, we recommend that they wait to start such a calendar until there is a very clear expectation of the return date. Starting such a calendar for the last month of deployment is usually OK. If a calendar is started too early it can make both the spouse and children feel a sense of loneliness when there are so many days left on the calendar. Also, if the deployment is extended for any reason, parents and children feel betrayed and may actually get angry with the Guard member or Reservist even though it is likely that the extension was not their choice.

**Sustainment Phase.** After several months into the deployment, families may have established new routines and a new sense of predictability, despite missing the other parent. However, if children do not seem to be adapting reasonably or if their behavior regresses and has not returned to normal, it is wise to seek professional assistance. It is not a sign of failure on the part of either parent if a child remains distressed over the absence of the Reservist. Each child is unique and some children have different ways of responding to this stress. Respect your children’s emotions as part of their experience and ask for help if you feel that you or your children are struggling. You are not alone. There are many resources available for military families,

including specific resources for Guard and Reservist’s families.

**“Respect your children’s emotions as part of their experience and ask for help if you feel that you or your children are struggling.”**

In the combat zone, the Guard member and Reservist will have established some type of routine depending on the nature of their duty. Tension inevitably builds up both because of the inherent danger and the fact that many of the things that the Guard member and Reservist would

normally do to cope with stress are now absent. Most military personnel deployed to a combat zone are going to experience some sleep disturbance and this can lead to irritability even when they get a chance to call home. When calling or writing home, it is extremely important for the deployed parents to not project their military stress

onto their spouse or children. Although few people want to lie to their families, it is generally better to not share fearsome stories or details with a spouse or children. Even if the Guard member and Reservist was not frightened by a military event or considered an event to be exciting, the family members at home may not see it the same way. Again, the family at home is powerless to do anything about the dangers of the combat zone. It is better to talk about other things and not reveal or discuss frightening information while still deployed.

It is worth noting that although phone and e-mail service may be readily available now, it may not consistently and predictably be available. These services are likely to get interrupted by operational needs,



weather and electronic malfunction. We urge parents to not assume that something bad has happened to the military member or that they are not communicating by choice. The combat zones truly are third world countries with very limited communications infrastructure. While it is very important for the deployed parents to make every effort they can to call or e-mail home to maintain the emotional connection with their family members, loved ones must also understand that this will not always be possible to the degree and frequency that they might like.

**Mid-Deployment R & R.** Many Guard members and Reservists serving deployment tours of a year or more receive a scheduled R & R period during which they can fly home. Although this is intended to reduce the overall stress of lengthy deployment, an R & R can be a mixed blessing. Families should try to plan for the R & R well in advance of the actual trip home, but expect the unexpected. It is a good idea to not spend a lot of money on non-refundable activities because the actual flight home will generally be on a space-available status. This means that the military member's flight home and flight back could shift days or weeks from the original plan. Given that the mid-deployment R & R will normally only be 1-2 weeks, parents should try to not disrupt children's routines any more than they have to. That said, it is important to remember that the R & R is for the purpose of helping the military member to relax and be able to return to the combat zone more physically and emotionally rested.

Pre-school and elementary school children may have the greatest need to reconnect with the military parent during R & R. Young children may begin to forget some things about the absent parent but may feel disloyal for forgetting. It is important to keep in mind the developmental stage of the children when planning R & R activities. Younger children may benefit more from quiet quality time with the military parent as opposed to a flashy trip to an amusement park.



A mid-deployment R & R is not a good time to try to resolve all of the family problems. If there are significant family problems, there may need to be an agreement to put those discussions on hold until after the deployment. That doesn't mean to sit and stew over them, but remember that the Guard member or Reservist is going to have to go back to a combat zone at the end of the R & R. Even with an enjoyable R & R period, some Guard members and

Reservists may find it more distressing to return to the combat zone than they did when they arrived there the first time. Those feelings are relatively common and will normally subside after a few weeks.

**Extended Deployments.** There is no doubt that very long deployments and involuntary extensions of tours of duty are extremely stressful to families. The longer the deployment the more likely it is that at least some family members will begin to show signs of strain. Although we realize this is easier said than done, it becomes even more important in longer deployment that both parents continue to devote special attention to children's needs. Even though most spouses realize that the military spouses have no control over the length of their tour, people can slip into feeling like the Guard member or Reservist has abandoned the family. Long deployments are one of the times that it is most helpful to have additional support for both the children and the parent left at home.

The Guard member or Reservist may react to the stress of a long deployment by slipping into thinking that they shouldn't have to put energy into their relationships.

They may see themselves as being the ones carrying the biggest burden—especially if they are frequently in extreme danger. Tempting as it may be to let the family connection sit on the sideline, the Guard member and Reservist need to beware of the tendency to take family relationships for granted. In long deployments parents need to discuss the reality of day to day demands and work out some reasonable ways to maintain loving connections with each other and with their children. If children's emotional needs are set aside with the Guard member and Reservist thinking they will make up for it when they get home, they risk not being able to rebuild needed emotional bonds. Even short communications over the phone or e-mail on a reasonable basis are better than long periods of silence. Additionally, long periods of not hearing from the Guard member or Reservist increase the likelihood that the child will begin to fear their military parent has been killed. While there are no easy ways to deal with long deployments, we encourage parents to pull in all of the emotional support they can during this time. This may mean asking a loving family member to visit on a much more frequent basis or even to move into the home temporarily.

**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 the 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 are now older and more competent and they may 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 children are 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 has awaited the reunion with such excitement. Even if life before the deployment wasn't great, families can tend to look back and almost idealize that time. While the present media focus on cases of posttraumatic stress disorder is well-intended, it has contributed to the concern that anyone who deploys to a combat zone will be different when they return. Others may fear that the "different," though, will be a bad different. As any "glow" from early reunion fades, the extra attention to post-deployment issues can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than expecting things to "go back to the way they were," it may be helpful to think of the family adjusting to a "new normal."

All of these potential issues will become more exaggerated in instances where the returning family member has been psychologically or physically wounded. Being aware of and addressing the new as well as the old stressors are an important part of reunification process.

In the event of death, injury, disfigurement and/or rehabilitation, maintaining a stable family situation becomes even more challenging. All family members may have trouble adjusting to the sight of a disfigured soldier or one with radically reduced cognitive abilities as a result of traumatic brain injury. Additional stressors and changing family relationships throughout the phases of reunification may require additional supports from extended family, community and friends. Professional guidance may be essential to process the grief and the effects of the war on the returnee and consequently on the family.

## CHAPTER 4

# How Age Affects a Child's Ability to Understand the Deployment and Needs in Dealing with the Deployment <sup>4</sup>

### 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 military 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 Guard member or Reservist 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 the deployment, their experience of the separation is shaped primarily by the absence of their military parent and by the change in day to day family 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 typically cause the greatest stress, they may also have questions about why their parent left and wonder if they are somehow to blame for the parent leaving.

**Needs.** Preschool children need to know that they have a caring parent at home 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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 hear news about the war, 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 be 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). Again, we emphasize that it is healthy for parents to shield their children from watching news about the war. This isn't being overprotective—you are preventing your children from becoming overly fearful about something they have no control over.

Children 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, children 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. They may also feel somehow responsible for the absence. It is wise to not allow children to take on an adult type role while the Guard member or Reservist is deployed. Parents may think, "Isn't it great how helpful the children are being." But experience shows us that when children take on the role of being a substitute parent they end up later resenting it. They are likely to later feel bad because a part of their childhood was lost.

**Needs.** Much like younger children, school-age children need to have routines maintained and know the remaining parent will continue to care for them during the other parent's absence.

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 the 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 their peers to avoid experiencing feelings which are uncomfortable. In some instances, the teen may even try to take on the role of the absent parent within the family. Other teens 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 adjustment difficulties prior to the deployment, there is an increased likelihood that he or she will experience difficulty during the deployment stage as well.

**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.

## CHAPTER 5

# Common Reactions to Deployment

## Preschool Children

### **Possible Feelings**

- ♦ Confusion
- ♦ Surprise (e.g., surprise about everything feeling so different)
- ♦ Guilt (e.g., guilt for causing the parent to leave)

### **Possible Resulting Behaviors**

- ♦ 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 behaviors (e.g., more thumb sucking, bedwetting)
- ♦ Sleep disturbances
- ♦ More easily frustrated/harder to comfort
- ♦ Acting out scary events

## Elementary Children

### **Possible Feelings**

- ♦ 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

### **Possible Resulting Behaviors**

- ♦ New behavior problems (or intensification of already existing problems)
- ♦ Regressive behaviors (e.g., acting as if at an earlier stage of development)
- ♦ 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**

- \* Anger
- \* Sadness
- \* Depression
- \* Anxiety
- \* Fear
- \* Pseudo Adult Behavior

### **Possible Resulting Behaviors**

- \* 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
- \* Assuming responsibilities appropriate for an adult, not an adolescent

### **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 better meet the needs of your children.

If above behaviors become more extreme or continue well after the deployed parent has returned home.

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.

## **CHAPTER 6**

# **What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child During the Deployment**

### **General Tips**

**W**WE ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO TRY TO RELAX and realize that they don't have to have all the answers. This is true whether it is issues related to deployment or other things. That doesn't mean that a parent should not act right away when their child's behavior is potentially harmful. Rather, parents are encouraged to realize that most issues are not emergencies. It may be helpful for parents to ask themselves, "Is this life threatening or morally threatening?" The simple act of asking yourself that question can help you to calm down and work on finding a good solution to the issue. When the child is calm, you may also want to help them by sharing whatever helpful "self-talk" you use in such situations to help you gain control of your own emotions. The simple skill of changing unhelpful self-talk to "Stop and think," "Slow down," or "Dad (or Mom) will return safely" is one of the valuable life lessons parents can teach their children.

### **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.
- ✦ Allow children to put together "goody boxes" 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 the newspaper.
- ✦ Seek encouragement and support from extended family and friends. Consider having a trusted family member or friend visit much more frequently (or move into the home if that is practical) to help with childcare and to give you more adult support.
- ✦ Ask family and friends not to talk about scary aspects of the deployment in front of your child.
- ✦ Maintain regular family 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 to work out ideas, such as dramatic play and art materials.
- ✦ If your child starts to play in scary or disturbing ways, remember that young children work through frightening things by acting them out in play. Support the child's play with understanding and reassurance rather than discouraging it.
- ✦ 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.

- ✦ 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 and respect the privacy of their journal.
- ✦ Encourage teens to continue community and extracurricular activities.
- ✦ Help teens remain connected to the deployed family member.



## CHAPTER 7

# What the Deploying/Deployed National Guard Member and Reservist Can Do

**B**EFORE DEPLOYING the National Guard member and Reservist should make every effort they can to spend quality time with their children. Creating special and unique experiences and having video or pictures of those times can help the child in a significant way. This could be done by doing something that you wouldn't normally do (e.g., having a much bigger or more unique birthday party than you normally would) but that your child will really enjoy. This gives both your child *and you* a really happy memory to reminisce about during the deployment.

With younger children, some parents will take a military medal, ribbon or military award that they earned and ask their child to take special care of it during the deployment. If you entrust your child to take care of something important for you while you are gone, that sends a powerful positive message. From the child's perspective, "Of course my Daddy is going to return because I have his medal!" You can file the sharp edges off of a metal device, and be sure to have a spare stashed away in case they lose the object. The parent at home would then be able to "find" the lost device. This simple act has helped many children to lessen separation anxiety. Even older children may be helped considerably by allowing them to pick something of yours for them to keep in their room while you are gone.

**“Creating special and unique experiences and having video or pictures of those times can help the child in a significant way.”**

Send home pictures of you (that are not scary or gruesome) as often as you can. Also, sending home pictures or video of your living quarters, your vehicles or other places in your deployed location can help your child to get a mental image of you “alive and well” even though in a combat zone. For example, a picture of a chow hall will remind your children of their lunch room at school and will help them to think of you as being safe.

If there are opportunities to send back pictures, letters or small things that your child can share in their classes, your child will feel very proud about sharing such things and others are more likely to initiate conversations with your child about the deployment. For example, one parent sent back small brass camels (very inexpensive overseas) for every child in their child's class. All of the classmates were delighted to get a present from a far away place and thought the veteran's child was very lucky to have such a parent. Two years later, one of the classmates came up to the veteran at a school function and thanked the parent again for such a "cool gift." These kinds of experiences help the child to feel proud of their family and also help to alleviate some of the loss the child experiences during the deployment.



While you are deployed be cautious about criticizing or giving advice to the parent at home. It is easy to think up answers to problems with the children when you aren't the one listening to their screaming or having to clean up messes. As much as you can, let your spouse know that you trust his or her judgment and support his or her decisions. It is not helpful to make comparisons about the stress at home and what you may be facing in the combat zone.

In preparation for return home, the National Guard member and Reservist should let their family know clearly what they would like to have in the way of a homecoming party or celebration. It needs to be reasonable given that the parent at home probably had the greater burden in the family. If you want a party, at least let them know you would like that. If you want a quiet homecoming let them know that too. Homecoming is a celebration of your return to your family and you should be the one to decide what extended family and friends are invited to participate. It doesn't mean you don't love your parents or siblings if you ask them to wait to visit later. This is a time for you to reconnect with your spouse and children. This reconnection may include children of divorce who are not living near the home of the returning soldier; their needs will have to be considered as well.

Upon return it is better if your children's routines are not disrupted in a significant way. You may want to spend a lot of time with them but try not to keep them up late at night. It may be most helpful if you ask your spouse what they would like for you to do as far as reintegrating with the family. Remember that you are used to being in an environment where people give orders and direction. It may take a few weeks or



months to shift back into some of your previous roles. Additionally, many veterans feel like they shouldn't have to do anything they don't want to do when they first get home. Those feelings are really pretty common and shouldn't be looked upon as being pathological. But you do need to begin the process of reintegration and becoming an active part of the family. The parent who was at home usually has the best perspective on what the children need and want. If you find yourself avoiding your children or you do not feel you are reconnecting with them it would be wise to talk to your spouse about this and possibly seek help from a counselor.

It can seem overwhelming to some Guard members and Reservists if they get home and their children start chattering away as if they were going to tell the parent everything that happened to them while the parent was deployed. There is nothing unusual about the child's behavior if they do this. In order to not feel overwhelmed though, we recommend that the Reservist just sit back and take a listening role as much as possible. If children are unusually talkative, they aren't doing that in order to get advice. They are reconnecting in a way that feels normal for them. Try to take joy in simply listening to your child's stories, even if you don't know any of the people involved in the stories or you don't know what the context of the story is. Just listen and honor your child's emotions and experience. You may even want to encourage them to tell you stories. This probably is one of the best ways to reconnect in a loving way. Also, remember that if you take your child to some place like an amusement park, you are not going to be able to have any of these "emotional connection" types of conversations. It is actually better to wait till you

**“Try to take joy  
in simply listening  
to your child’s  
stories.”**

have been back a while and have done the emotional reconnection before you go off to an amusement park or on a big trip. It would clearly not be a fun vacation if you felt overwhelmed or irritated and you had to now deal with an enormous amount of bothersome things that are sometimes involved in a family trip. Sitting in a car

for a long drive may not be the best thing to do when you first get home. If you were on a long car trip and started to feel irritated you wouldn't have anyplace to go to take a little break to relax.

Almost everyone returning from deployment to a combat zone is going to experience some irritation when they first get home—there is nothing unusual about this. The vast majority of people do not act on those feelings in any harmful way and the feelings gradually subside. If you realize that this is a pretty normal response and “don't get sucked into it,” then it is more likely to subside. Don't set yourself up for trouble though, by expecting yourself to be able to come home and immediately become “super mom” or “super dad.”

## CHAPTER 8

# Talking with Your Child About Deployment and War <sup>5, 6</sup>

### 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.

**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 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?"

**Older children think about what underlies an event and possible real world implications of what they hear.** They use more precise language. They 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> For more assistance see: The PBS Parents Guide on Talking to Kids about War and Violence ([www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/war](http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/war)).

**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 or need 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 says, “I wish they didn’t have to fight,” you might respond by saying, “A lot of people wish that and are working hard to stop the fighting.” 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. Remember that even your teens will not be helped by hearing facts that suggest the parent could be hurt or killed.

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

## **CHAPTER 9**

# **What Parents Can Do to Support Children During the Reunion Period**

### **Preparation**

- ✦ Talk to your children about the impending return.
- ✦ Help them work or play it through before it happens.
- ✦ Assist them in thinking about things they may want to say and do with the returning parent.
- ✦ Prepare them for changes and anticipate unanticipated stressors.
- ✦ Create time for them to express feelings of guilt at the difficulty they might have looking at or dealing with a severely wounded or cognitively impaired parent.

### **Follow-Up**

All family members have changed during the months of separation:

Returning parents may have physical and psychological needs as a result of the war experience that they will need to work on long after the initial reunification. Rehabilitation for physical injuries often may extend the period of separation and reunification as well as the adjustments required by all family members.<sup>7</sup> All family members will need permission and time to grieve and to adjust to the losses before they can hope to grow from meeting the challenges. Many returnees experience psychological readjustment difficulties such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD],<sup>8</sup> depression,<sup>9</sup> anxiety,<sup>10</sup> and substance abuse.<sup>11</sup> These conditions can show themselves in such symptoms as personality change, erratic and violent behavior,

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<sup>7</sup> *Our Hero Handbook: A Guide for Families of Wounded Soldiers*. US Department of Defense. Download from web at: See Resources Section

<sup>8</sup> [www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org)

<sup>9</sup> [www.depression.org](http://www.depression.org)

<sup>10</sup> [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

<sup>11</sup> [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

self-absorption and disconnection with others, and general irritability. Some of the symptoms don't appear immediately; for instance, PTSD can appear as long as 6 to 9 months after returning home.

The non-deployed parent may have changed, for instance as a result of functioning in the role of a single parent during the months when the Guard member or Reservist was away.

Children will have matured and learned to function in a single parent household.

All these changes contribute to increased tensions and needs, for the parents and their relationship, as well as for the parents' relationship with their children.

Levels of tension and expressions of anger can increase between parents. Communication in the marriage—a shift back from fighting on the battlefield to intimacy in the bedroom—can put serious strain on both partners. This can ultimately lead to separation, and even divorce, putting new kinds of strain on everyone.

When the returning parent has changed and if family tensions arise, children can feel rejected, blame themselves and/or have trouble relating to and trusting others. They may lose interest in things they used to care about.

## What May Help

Help children understand the unanticipated changes, especially in terms of how they are affecting the children themselves. Let them know that what is happening is not their fault and that it is the job of grown-ups, not theirs, to make it better.

If changes in behavior occur in the children—such as sleep disturbance, acting like a younger child, making extra demands, heightened anger—recognize that this may be a consequence of changes in the returning parent and the family.

Provide extra support. And let other members of children's support network—grandparents, other relatives and friends, teachers—know the children may need special help and support too.

If difficulties continue or seem to be worsening, seek counseling for the returning parent, the couple, the family and/or the child. *Military One Source* is one available resource.

Make use of on-line resources like Battlemind, [www.battlemind.org](http://www.battlemind.org), that spells out behaviors that may be acceptable or preferable at the war front but not at home in civilian life.

## CHAPTER 10

# When the Military Parent Is Injured or Killed on Deployment

**Death of the parent.** The death of a parent is an extremely traumatic event in the life of a child. Children (perhaps with the exception of children under the age of about 3, who may not remember the lost parent) will be affected to some extent for the rest of their lives. This is not to say that they will have lifelong emotional problems, rather they will have to completely redefine themselves and their world in the context of such a loss. We strongly recommend that the surviving parent seek additional professional assistance from the military and other organizations that offer guidance on how to help children learn to cope with this loss in a healthy way.

**Issues for the surviving parent.** Probably the greatest factor in how a child will recover from such a loss is how the surviving parent deals with the death. Death of a spouse is one of the most distressing events that could happen to any

“Probably the greatest factor in how a child will recover from such a loss is how the surviving parent deals with the death.”

adult. The surviving parent will be dealing with their own trauma while trying to help their children. While National Guard and Reserve families often do not have other military families around them to offer continued support, they may have extended family, close friends, and concerned neighbors who can help provide support required to sustain the surviving spouse and children through the prolonged grieving and readjustment period. We recommend that the parent try to take advantage of any and all resources offered by the military, Department of

Veterans Affairs (VA) or other non-profit community organizations who specialize in support for military families. The military services and VA in particular have considerable expertise in assisting surviving family members and most of these resources will be at no cost.

One factor that may be different for families of National Guard and Reserve members is that family members may, even more so than surviving family members of regular active duty soldiers, have an expectation that their family return to their civilian existence after deployment. Although with the present wars and deployments, few Reservists are surprised about having to go to war, families still do not have the full immersion in military life like the families of regular active duty. Families of Reservists will seldom be living in military housing and will usually not have a lot of neighbors in the military. The deployment to a combat zone may be something that families of Reservists feel they just have to tolerate, but is not a real part of their life as a family. If then, the Reservist is killed, it can create much more anger in the surviving family members. "This wasn't part of the deal, it was just supposed to be weekend drills and a yearly activation." If family members have some feelings like those it is most helpful if others listen patiently and simply honor the feelings. The death of the military member is always a terrible event, for families of any soldier. Children who experience the death of a National Guard or Reservist parent have some different needs from children of regular military. The children of the National Guard Member and Reservist are



not as likely to have friends who are also in military families and they may feel an extreme sense of isolation after a death. Other civilian families may be at a loss as to how to help and they are not likely to know about any of the many resources available from the military and the VA. Additionally, after hearing of the death of a Reservist in war, some adults and children simply do not know what to say or do and may tend to avoid the grieving family. At least, the children of National Guard and Reservists can remain in their communities, unlike the children of active duty military who must begin a civilian life after the death of a parent. Again, we believe it is essential for the surviving parent to connect with others in the military who can provide support and any needed professional help. As with the death of a parent under any circumstances, we encourage parents to shield their children from taking on a substitute parenting role. When children assume too many adult type roles in the family, they are deprived of some of the joy of childhood and they miss out on some developmental experiences they will need in order to have a happy adult

life. We would not suggest that life for the surviving parent is going to be easy after death of the other parent, but they do need to try to bring in any additional adult support and resources they can in order to try to protect and support the children.

**Issues for the children after death of a parent.** Much of the child's reaction will be based on the age of the child. Infants and very young children may not remember the parent. It is OK if a child does not remember details about the deceased parent. Children should never be given the message that they are ungrateful or unloving. The surviving parent may share stories about the other parent in order to help them remember their other parent, but such stories need



to be reasonable and helpful. Given that there is no such thing as a perfect parent, it is not helpful to portray the dead parent as a saint. That could set the child up to feeling that they will never match up with whatever they think the idealized parent would have expected of them. The surviving parent may be tempted to portray the deceased parent as a great hero, but suggesting that the

parent was much more heroic than they actually were can lead to difficulties later. Most children will want to know more details about their parent's death as they grow older, and they could feel betrayed if the story told was far from the truth. It could also set the children up for disappointment or anger with any other adults who may come into their lives. If the surviving parent later decided to remarry, it could be incredibly difficult for the new step-parent to blend into the family.

Whatever the manner of the parent's death, it is not helpful for children to be told details about how they died. Children should be reassured that the parent did not suffer (brutal truth is often more brutal than true) and reassured in loving ways consistent with the family's faith or beliefs. The surviving parent can use pictures from before deployment to refer back to in order to preserve that image in the child's memory.



**Injury of the parent.** If a National Guard member or Reservist is injured during a deployment, life for their children and spouse may be very seriously affected. Depending on the type and severity of injury the family may have to completely redefine itself. The veteran may also experience emotional distress over leaving their buddies behind in the combat zone. No one wants to come home from combat injured. For some it can feel like a huge failure experience and they may bring a large amount of guilt feelings home along with the injuries. Children will not likely understand any such feelings—to them it is usually better that their parent is home even if they are injured. It will be important that other adults in the child's life help to shield the child as much as possible from any disturbing emotions the veteran may be experiencing. Children will not benefit from hearing a parent say they wish they had died

“Depending on the type and severity of injury the family may have to completely redefine itself.”

instead, or that they should have stayed with their buddies. If the veteran is expressing such emotions we recommend that other adults help the veteran to resolve that distress without exposing their child to it. Serious injury to the veteran can place a significant amount of strain on any relationship but we encourage spouses to also seek help if they find themselves unable to deal with the changes.

**Amputation of a limb or other very serious physical injury or disfigurement.** Military personnel who are very seriously injured will have gone through one of the special military programs created to serve the military person and their family. We encourage families to continue to use any of the resources they find helpful and to always have contact numbers in case new needs arise. National Guard members or Reservists who need to be fitted for a prosthetic device will have that service provided by the military or VA, but the process of adapting to living with prosthesis is going to be a challenge for everyone in the family. Children may be very distressed by seeing the parent's injury, by seeing the prosthesis, by the loss of activities they can no longer do with the parent, by the emotional struggles of the injured parent or by any conflict between the parents.

Although there may be an initial outpouring of support for the seriously injured parent, that attention tends to subside over time as others develop an expectation that the veteran assume more autonomy as possible. The majority of that initial attention also is focused around the veteran. Although the family would not intentionally be excluded, some families cannot travel to where the veteran may have to receive medical or rehabilitation care. If the veteran is away from the family for an extended

period of time, this can create a sense of estrangement between the family members. Children need special attention to help them develop as much of an emotional connection to their veteran parent as possible. As adults talk with the children about the veteran's injuries or rehabilitation, the message needs to have a hopeful tone. We would not suggest that parents tell their children that things will be the same if they clearly won't, but children do not need to hear all of the tedious or painful details of what the veteran's treatment will entail. In age appropriate terms, children should be given information that is helpful and encouraging.

Veterans who are recovering or dealing with very serious injury may have some episodes of anger, extreme frustration, or the appearance of an "entitlement" attitude that may disturb others. Trauma is inherently narcissistic—most people feel like the world should stop for them (for at least a while) when they experience a trauma. Others around the veteran can help by encouraging the person to talk about those emotions and get professional help if needed. We recommend that others not get drawn into

**“Emotions are not ‘wrong’ or ‘bad.’ It is what we do with our emotions that can be a bigger issue.”**

confrontations about the veteran's emotions. Family members and others should use appropriate boundaries as needed but not get into arguments over emotions.

Again, emotions are not “wrong” or “bad.” It is what we do with our emotions that can be a bigger issue. If the veteran acts in an overly aggressive manner or is emotionally abusive at times, then the family or others need to have a calm discussion with the veteran about his or her behavior. If

family members feel they cannot address the veteran's behavior in a helpful way, we recommend they talk to one of the professionals in the military or VA about how to address the issues.

The veteran is likely to have many changes in emotions over time as they struggle to create a new life in the face of his or her injuries. Although great advances have been made in surgery and prosthetics it is never easy to recover from very serious injury. The veteran went from being a healthy able-bodied individual to being permanently disabled in the flash of a moment. For some people it takes many years to adequately adjust to the physical injuries. If repeat surgeries are required over time this can cause a great deal of distress. In the military individuals generally have an expectation that they will be healthy and that broken things will get fixed. But adaptation or recovery from serious injury never moves as fast as people would like it to. If the veteran has either no hope or unrealistic hope it can greatly complicate the healing process.

If there is significant disfigurement it is critical that children be adequately prepared before seeing the parent again. Professionals in the medical treatment setting will be available to work with the other parent to prepare the child for seeing their parent again. Each case is unique and is based on the severity of disfigurement and how well the children may be able to deal with seeing their injured parent. It may be advisable to cover badly disfigured parts of the body if possible in order to not frighten small children. However, it is important that children be allowed to be with their injured parent as soon as the children can be adequately prepared. Injured veterans who are extremely fearful of allowing their children to visit or see them should be offered any needed support or professional guidance. If visitation or reunion is delayed too long, children may begin to feel that their parent does not love them. Younger children could fear that their parent is going to die or is already dead and no one has told them.

It is important that the other parent and other adults in the children's lives help to provide healthy structure and stability in the child's life if the injured Reservist is struggling. Even if a parent later apologizes for something they said or did, some things can't be taken back. All adults in the child's life should keep foremost in mind that the child is innocent in any of the struggles the adults face.

**Injury due to “friendly fire” or accident.** The special circumstances of serious injury from “friendly fire” or accident create additional issues for veterans and their families. Many individuals who are injured in this manner will develop considerable anger. It violates our “Western” view of how the world functions if a soldier is shot or badly injured by his/her own comrades. If soldiers cannot trust their fellow soldiers then who can they trust? It can lead to a pervasive distrust of everyone in the military, perhaps even military medical personnel who are trying to help.

Serious accidents not related to combat can cause emotional problems for the veteran. When veterans return home injured, many people will ask them about their injuries in a harmless way. When others ask about an injury they may expect that the veteran is going to have a heroic story to tell and that the veteran will feel honored by the question. If the person was injured in an accident though, there is no glamorous war story to tell. Some veterans become very irritated or angry with such questions—especially after the hundredth time they are asked the question. We recommend that any injured veteran, no matter what the cause of the injury, develop some “exit strategies” or benign “canned responses” to avoid conflict over questions about their injuries. Something like, “It’s a long story you don’t want to hear,” or “I got injured and I’m working on recovering, but I appreciate your concern,” can help the veteran to change the subject and avoid discussions they don’t want to have.

If a veteran has been injured by “friendly fire” or accident they can explain to their child that they were serving their country honorably and just got injured. Younger children will usually be satisfied with such an answer. If older children ask a lot of questions and seem disturbed or curious about how such a thing could happen, parents can provide whatever age appropriate information they think will help to reassure their child.

**Serious psychological injury.** Even if the veteran has not suffered serious physical injury, if they experience serious psychological injury it is imperative that they receive professional assistance. There are effective treatments available for psychological injury and those services will be offered by the military, VA and other organizations. We always recommend that any therapist treating a veteran for trauma meet with the spouse at least once as part of the treatment. It may be extremely helpful to have family sessions as part of the therapy. Our country’s experience after Vietnam reveals that untreated posttraumatic stress (or other serious psychological distress) will spill over onto the family and harm children. If a therapist can get information from family members they can better assess what treatments are needed and whether progress is being made.

## CHAPTER 11

# What Schools Can Do to Support Children & Families Dealing with the Deployment of a Parent <sup>12</sup>

SCHOOLS HAVE A VITAL ROLE TO PLAY in helping children whose parents have been deployed both during the deployment as well as when the parent returns from deployment.

### 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 issues themselves because of their own stresses or ambivalent feelings or because they are not sure how the school can help them.

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.

Try to add some things into the school routine that honor the experience of the military family. Some classes write to the military member during the deployment or make class projects to send to the National Guard member or Reservist. Small projects that can be easily mailed give the child a chance to shine in the spotlight and are a great boost to the morale of the service member.

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<sup>12</sup> *Working with Military Children: A Primer for School Personnel*. Virginia Joint Military Services Board and the Military Child Education Coalition, 2001.

It is not unreasonable during a school assembly or award presentation, to mention and honor the deployed service member. Remember that we are the “home of the free because of the brave.”

If possible, schools should consider offering “incentives” to the parent at home. Knowing that the other parent is deployed, the school or teachers could offer to baby sit other children or some other type of incentive, to help the parent participate in school activities or meet with teachers.

A simple but very thoughtful favor would be to offer an additional copy of any of the child’s school papers or grade reports so the family could mail a copy to the deployed parent. It sends the message to the child that the school thinks their deployed parent is important, sends a message to the parent at home that the school respects the sacrifice they make, and it sends the message to the deployed member that the school honors and appreciates their service and their role as a parent.

### **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.

## **Do not reinforce the child's idea that everything will be right when the parent returns.**

Help prepare child for the period of readjustment rather than an instant normalcy.

Allow expressions of worry or even disgust about a wounded or disfigured parent.

Encourage children to develop tolerance for difference and for the parent's disability not to feel like a secret.

## **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 venues for communicating 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; and
  - Participation in exercise and/or writing outlets such as poetry or journal writing.

## CHAPTER 12

# **Guide for Pediatricians that Treat Children Whose Parents Have Been Deployed to a Combat Zone or Have Recently Returned**

**A**CKNOWLEDGE THE DEPLOYMENT or return and provide the child with an opportunity to respond.

Provide a second copy of documents about the child's medical care/needs so the parent at home can send it to the deployed parent. This reinforces the importance of the deployed parent in decision making regarding the child's health needs.

Consider having something (e.g., poster, quote such as Theodore Roosevelt quote) on the wall in your waiting area to acknowledge the service of military families.

Offer reassurance, whether or not the child raises any issues.

Offer to answer any questions a child may have about a parent's injury.

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.

Help normalize the difficulty of learning to live with a physically, cognitively, or emotionally impaired family member.

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](http://www.aap.org/terrorism)) includes up-to-date listings on all aspects of disaster preparedness for children, including their psychological needs.

**Psychosocial Issues For Children And Families In Disasters: A Guide For The Primary Care Physician**. <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA95-3022/default.asp>

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
- Feelings Need Checkups Too (CD-ROM available from the AAP at [www.aap.org/profed/childrencheckup.htm](http://www.aap.org/profed/childrencheckup.htm))



## CHAPTER 13

# 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:**

[www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org)

[www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

[www.hooah4health.com/environment/deployment/emotionalcycle.htm](http://www.hooah4health.com/environment/deployment/emotionalcycle.htm)

[www.iraqwarveterans.org/family\\_support.htm](http://www.iraqwarveterans.org/family_support.htm)

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

[www.guardfamily.org](http://www.guardfamily.org)

[www.guardfamilyyouth.org](http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org)

[www.defenselink.mil/ra/](http://www.defenselink.mil/ra/) (click on “Family Readiness”)

[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) (American Academy of Pediatrics). Click on “Children’s Health” topics, then “Children and Disasters and Behavioral and Mental Health”

[www.aap.org/terrorism](http://www.aap.org/terrorism)

[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/walter-reed/?hpid=rightpromo1](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/walter-reed/?hpid=rightpromo1)

## Resources

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

*Children of Veterans and Adults with PTSD.* Jennifer Price.

[www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact\\_shts/fs\\_children\\_veterans.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_children_veterans.html)

*Parent's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment and Reunion.*

Department of Defense. [www.operationhomefront.org/downloads/Parents\\_Guide\\_Deployment\\_Reunion.pdf](http://www.operationhomefront.org/downloads/Parents_Guide_Deployment_Reunion.pdf)

*Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment.* Document sponsored by the Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense.

[www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.doc](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.doc)

*Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma.* Michelle Sherman & Deanne Sherman, Beavers Pond Press, Edina, Minnesota

*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.

*Our Hero Handbook: A Guide for Families of Wounded Soldiers.* US Department of Defense. [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/walter-reed/HeroHandbook.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/walter-reed/HeroHandbook.pdf)

*The Psychological Needs of U.S. Military Service Members and Their Families: A Preliminary Report.* American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.

[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

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

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

[www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/militarysupport/resources/ncfpresourceguide.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/militarysupport/resources/ncfpresourceguide.pdf)

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