



Preparing Children for a Military Parent's Deployment

Separations are a fact of life for military families, but they can hit children particularly hard. Children may become anxious when a parent leaves, whether it's to a combat zone or a weekend of training with the National Guard. Younger children may become clingy and fearful while older kids may act out, their schoolwork may suffer, and they may have trouble sleeping.

Children fare better in a parent's absence when they know what to expect ahead of time. Here are some tips to pass along to military families who are facing deployment or other separations.

- Ask the child about his concerns. The answer will guide your conversation. For example, if the child says he's afraid his parent will be hurt while on deployment, you and the parent can talk with the child about all of the ways military training will help to keep his parent safe.
- Help the parent discuss her role in the military so her child will understand why she has to leave. The child will feel more connected to the parent if she shares some details of the assignment, even if it's only talking in general terms about her part in keeping the country safe. Depending on the child's age, she may be able to share her parent's pride in serving the country.
- Suggest the parent find out what lines of communication will be available during the deployment and help him create a plan for staying in touch. The parent can also remind his children of the other important and supportive people in their lives and how they will stay in close touch with them while dad's away.
- Ask the parent to give the child opportunities to be helpful. Depending on the child's age, she might help her parent pack, draw a picture, or put together special photographs to bring along on the assignment. Another idea is for the parent and child to make lists of happy or funny family moments and exchange them.
- Remind parents to keep teachers or caregivers informed. When these important people in a child's life know a parent is away, they can monitor the child's behavior and emotions and notify the family of any changes. Teachers and caregivers will be better able to respond sensitively to any behavioral or academic issues that arise. And they should also be able to provide extra support for the child during this difficult time.

- Encourage families to make time together quality time. Both the parent and child need plenty of emotional contact and affection during the weeks and days before the parent's departure. Hugs and kisses are very important during this stressful time. Remind parents that even the briefest exchanges of support and love count.

–Adapted from *The Military Parent: Easing Separation Issues*, Workplace Options

If you are interested in providing non-medical counseling to military service members and their families through Military OneSource, please email us at mosproviderrelations@militaryonesource.com.