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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
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## *Military Families FAQs*

### How should I talk to my children about an upcoming deployment?

- Be honest, speak to each child's level of understanding, but don't overload them with information.
- Realize they will have questions and you may have to repeat explanations several times.
- Create a time and place for each child to ask questions in their own way.
- Listen to your children, answer their questions, and create a supportive environment for them before and during the deployment.

### What other steps can a family take to prepare for the deployment of a parent?

- Talk as a family before the reassignment, sharing information, feelings, worries and plans for the future. Let your child know that the family member is making a valuable contribution to their country and the world.
- Emphasize the need for the family to pull together during the parent's absence with everyone sharing in family responsibilities.
- Continue family traditions, structure and discipline. This is reassuring and stabilizing to children.
- Plan means (e.g. letters, email, phone) for the family members to communicate with the deployed parent.
- Monitor children's exposure to TV coverage of war events and political discussions of the war.
- Encourage the open and honest expression of worries, feelings, and questions.

- Consider having children participate in a project associated with their parent's deployment (e.g. classroom letter writing project, keeping a journal or scrapbook).
- Don't make promises that you can't keep.
- Initiate and maintain a close relationship and communication with your child's teachers and school.
- Utilize extended family, community and spiritual resources and other natural supports that are available both within and outside the military.

## What should the adult at home do about children's exposure to media reports when a parent is in a war zone?

- Monitor the amount of time your child watches news shows.
- Make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to the child.
- Watch the news with your child.
- Ask the child what he/she has heard and what questions he/she may have.
- Look for signs that the news may have triggered fears or anxieties.

## What are common reactions of children to a parent's deployment?

While most families and children manage successfully, it is important for parents to be aware of signs of stress and possibly serious problems. The responses of children to stress of separation are determined by their individual makeup and developmental age. The following are some common reactions:

- Infants (Birth - 12 months) may respond to disruptions in their schedule, physical environment or availability of caregivers with decreased appetite, weight loss, irritability and/or apathy.
- Toddlers (1-3 yrs.) may become sullen, tearful, throw temper tantrums or develop sleep problems.
- Preschoolers (3-6 yrs.) are more aware of the absence of a parent than younger children and their behavior may regress in areas such as toilet training, sleep, separation fears, physical complaints, or thumb sucking. They may personalize situations and express a fear that, "Daddy left because I was angry at him" or "Mommy stays away because she doesn't love me".
- School age children (6-12 yrs.) are more aware of the realities behind their parent leaving and the potential dangers. They may show irritable behavior, aggression or whininess. They also may become more regressed and fearful that their parent may be injured or die.

- Teenagers (13-18 yrs.) may be rebellious, irritable or more challenging of authority. Parents need to be alert to high-risk behaviors such as problems with the law, sexual acting out, and drug/alcohol abuse.

## What should a family do to prepare for reunion after a deployment?

Reunion of a military family after a long deployment is a cause for celebration. Some patience and understanding will go a long way to help the whole family successfully reunite with a minimum of problems. While most families cope successfully with the stress of the deployment and reunion, problems can develop. It is important to remember the needs and feelings of the returning family member, the adult at home, and the children.

- All family members will need time to adjust to the changes that accompany the return of the deployed family member.
- Open discussion of expectations prior to the return home are helpful if they are possible.
- Families should utilize the help offered by the military and other organizations to readjust to the reunion.
- Most families will change. Children have been born or have grown. An adult at home may have become more independent. The returning family member had a life changing experience. The goal is to form a healthy, new life together.

## What are common needs and feelings of family members after a deployment?

Military families look forward to being together after a long deployment with many mixed emotions. Each family member will have different expectations. Every family situation is different. But, it is important to remember the needs and feelings of the returning family member, the adult at home and the children.

### Understanding the Returning Family Member

- Military deployments, especially in a combat zone, can significantly change an individual's life.
- The deployment involved the loss of many comforts that people back home take for granted.
- The deployment involved hard work and enormous responsibility. If in a war zone, there was the constant threat of loss of life or injury. The family member may have witnessed injuries, deaths and destruction.

- The returning family member may seem preoccupied with the experience of their deployment. They may be unable to talk about it or may excessively talk about it.
- The returning family member may have suffered physical or emotional injury or disability.
- The returning family member may expect extra attention and support for some time after their return.
- The returning family member may have serious concerns about their financial or employment future.

#### Understanding the Adult that Stayed at Home

- Life has gone on and the adult at home has had to keep the family moving forward during the deployment. They may have had to take over many functions normally performed by the deployed family member.
- Often the adult at home has handled many small and not so small crises. These problems are old news at home but may be big surprises for the returning family member.
- The adult at home may expect extra attention and credit regarding the performance during the deployment. They also may expect the returning family members to automatically accept the family as it now exists and begin to perform a role with which they are uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

#### Understanding the Children

- Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parent. However, the excitement of the reunion is stressful for children. Children may also be anxious and uncertain about the reunion.
- Children's responses are influenced by their developmental level. Toddlers may not remember the parent well and act shy or strange around them. School age children may not understand the returning parent's need to take care of themselves and to spend time with their spouse. Teenagers may seem distant as they continue their activities with friends.
- Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This should not be misinterpreted or taken personally.

#### Understanding the Family

- Couples may find the deployment has strained their relationship. Time and negotiation will help the couple work toward a new loving relationship.
- Family problems that existed before the deployment frequently reappear after the deployment.
- Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles may have provided support and service to the family during the deployment. They may have difficulty redefining their role with the family.