

On the Home Front



Help your children deal with the stress of deployment.

By Tamekia Reece

Deployment is heart wrenching for all military families, but especially for families with children. As mom or dad tries to take on both parenting roles and cope with not having a partner for a long stretch of time, the kids have their own stress issues. Johnny, the toddler, may not understand why Mom isn't there to tuck him into bed. School-aged Brittany may worry Dad will be hurt like her friend's dad. And, Billy, dealing with the usual adolescent issues, now has to deal with his anger that Dad had to leave in the first place, along with new household responsibilities.

Although deployments will never be easy, there are things you can do to make it a little less stressful for your child.

Educate Yourself

Before a parent is deployed, one of the most beneficial things to do is educate yourself, says Col. Elisabeth Stafford, M.D., FAAP, a clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. "There are many programs and other resources available to inform family members about what to expect with deployment, possible feelings and reactions of the homefront caregiver and children as the deployment begins, and things to expect as the service member returns from deployment," she says.

If you're prepared about what to expect, you won't feel so thrown for a loop and will be better equipped to handle it if you or your child has a difficult time with the deployment, Dr. Stafford says.

Share ... and Listen

Probably the most important thing you can do to help alleviate some of your child's deployment-related stress is to talk with him about it — and listen. "Be open to answering your child's questions in as straightforward and age-appropriate way as possible," Dr. Stafford says.

And remember, kid see, kid do. You don't have to suppress your feelings, but, "if your children see you really stressed and falling apart, that can stress them out and they may echo your reaction," says Lt. Col. Molinda Chartrand, M.D., FAAP, a developmental/behavioral pediatrician in the U.S. Air Force.

It's okay to cry, be sad, or be worried, but talk about it with your child. "Explain you're crying because you're sad dad is gone, but also reiterate to the child that you love him and will always be here for him," Dr. Chartrand says. "That sends the child a dual message that it's okay to have feelings, and even though you're sad right now, you're there to support the child."

Monitor What They See

News reports of bombings and death, especially in areas where they know their parent is, may be stressful to kids, so you need to monitor access to those types of things.

With older kids, Dr. Stafford says, you may not be able to keep them from being exposed since they may have related school projects or may hear others talking about it in school. In those cases, "parents need to take the opportunity to talk with teenagers about what they're reading in the newspaper, discussing in school, or seeing on the news," Stafford says.

Quick Tips: Deployment Resources

- www.deploymentkids.com
- National Military Family Association: www.nmfa.org
- Talk, Listen, Connect: Helping Families Cope with Military Deployment: <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/initiatives/emotion/tlc>
- *Military Youth Coping With Separation: When Family Members Deploy* [Video] Military One Source (www.militaryonesource.com)
- *I Miss You!: A Military Kid's Book About Deployment* by Beth Andrews (Prometheus Books, 2007)
- *My Mommy Wears Combat Boots* by Sharon G. McBride (AuthorHouse 2008)

Quick Tips: Symptoms of Deployment Stress

Experts say deployment stress symptoms may vary depending on the child's age. Some symptoms may include:

- **Babies:** Feeding and/or sleeping difficulties, increased irritability, low energy
- **Toddlers and Preschoolers:** Aggressiveness, clinginess, changes in eating or sleeping habits, crying more often
- **Elementary age:** Regression (reverting back to baby talk or bedwetting), changes in eating or sleeping patterns, physical complaints like stomachaches or headaches
- **Adolescents:** Anger, moodiness, loss of interest in normal activities; risky behavior such as smoking, drinking, drug abuse, or sexual activity.



Maintain Closeness

Although the deployed parent is far away, he or she can remain close in the kids' hearts. A stuffed animal, necklace from mom, or a t-shirt with dad's photo on it can go a long way in helping the child feel closer to her deployed parent.

Some other ways to maintain closeness are pointing out on a map where the deployed parent is, letting the child send e-mails, cards and letters to the parent, letting her help prepare care packages, and even jotting down family life and hometown changes in a journal to keep the absent parent updated.

Keep Them Busy ... But Not Too Busy

If your child is used to having a play date on Tuesdays or going to child care in the mornings, try to keep doing those things. The family is already experiencing a huge change from a deployed parent, so if normal routines also change or cease, stress levels may increase more, Stafford says.

Just don't go overboard keeping your child busy. Trying to push hurt feelings or questions from your child's mind by overscheduling him won't work. It'll only cause him more stress and burnout.

Call in Help

"If you notice your kid's behavior seems very extreme, it seems to go on for a long period of time, it gets worse instead of getting better over time, or you or your child is very anxious, worried and

obsessed about the safety of the deployed service member and are finding it difficult to separate from that, you should seek help — whether it's from a military support group, a military physician, your child's pediatrician or a mental health professional," Dr. Chartrand says.

Although it can be tough to admit you're having trouble handling your partner's absence, or you may feel frustrated because you can't miraculously make your child feel better, don't let it stop you from getting help. Deployments are stressful for everyone, and getting the help that's needed will benefit the entire family. ●

Home, Sweet Home?

Although it may seem the child's stress should disappear when the deployed parent returns home, it may actually increase because the parent may return with physical or mental health issues, or the child may not want to get too close to the parent to avoid the pain of saying goodbye again if the parent is redeployed, says Col. Elisabeth Stafford, M.D., FAAP, a clinical professor of pediatrics. If you notice your child's stress remains or increases after the deployed parent returns, individual counseling and/or family counseling may help.