



Pathways to Care

Advancing the Health and Well-being of Military Families and Children



Supporting the Parent Left Behind: Help for Parenting

“When parents feel distressed, they have less energy, time, and attention for parenting their children.”

Supporting our military families includes helping military parents stay attentive and emotionally available to their children especially during a deployment when one parent becomes a solo-parent. What are the key principles that support emotional availability and can help maintain energy and morale of military parents, especially young parents? We help our military families when we educate about these important areas of parenting:

Caring for Oneself

Self-care is necessary if families are to stay strong during deployments. The non-deployed spouse must ensure that she or he gets enough rest, sets good priorities and stays reasonably organized. Our ability to be a parent, our parenting skill, is impaired when one is overtired, irritable, preoccupied or disorganized. Having a clean home, an organized closet and a well-stocked kitchen (relying less on fast food restaurants for meals) all contribute to family health and pride. Organized people have more time to spend on themselves and others. Remind parents that taking care of themselves also includes taking advantage of available community, health and mental health services that can sustain them through deployments.

Keep Structure, Schedules and Safety

Starting and maintaining family routines will help children know what to expect and help them feel comforted by the routine and predictability. Children thrive on structure and routine. It increases their sense of emotional well-being. Involving the children in planning family activities also increases their sense of being cared for and life having expectable events. Personal safety creates family safety. It is important to avoid risky behavior — drugs, alcohol, or inappropriate sexual activity. These behaviors can confuse children and lead to risk of family injury through reckless driving, accidents or household injury. It is important to know where your children are at all times and for them to know where you are.

Spend Time with Children and be Available

Nothing is as important or remembered as spending time with a child. Reading to children even when they are young is a gift to their intellectual and emotional growth. Talking about their day and learning what is on their minds, who their friends are, what subjects they most enjoy — all are necessary for building strong relationships. Children value parents attending their team games and may never talk about how they feel when important adults do not attend. Helping with homework, talking about daily activities and spending enjoyable time together are examples of positive parenting that are felt throughout a child's life into adulthood.

Discipline Includes Rewards

We often think of discipline as a reaction to bad or undesirable behavior. In fact, an important part of discipline is rewarding children for good behavior. Physical discipline is not advisable with children, especially during times of family stress. There are many ways to punish without resorting to spanking. It is important to find a healthy balance between being overly permissive (sometimes felt to be easier when one is tired or preoccupied) and being rigid (which can backfire and cause more difficulty). Lastly, do not expect a child to “replace” the deployed parent — in jobs at home or in providing emotional support to the parent left home. It is important to remember the age of ones children and their needs and abilities.

Often when parents are lonely, tired, frustrated or sad due to military separations and the difficult task of solo-parenting, they can forget some of the basics of good parenting: keeping order, taking care of yourself, and being emotionally available to children.

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