# PARENT'S GUIDE TO THE MILITARY CHILD DURING DEPLOYMENT AND REUNION

This booklet is dedicated to helping parents of military families support their children during deployment.

# INTRODUCTION

This guide is written for military parents because children are especially vulnerable when separated from their loved ones during deployments. Their unique developmental perspective and limited life experience put them at a heightened risk for emotional distress during the separation period. The demands on military members and their families are increasing and are becoming more complex. Military families sacrifice their personal comfort and experience tremendous upheaval when soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, reservists and National Guard members are called to serve our country here or abroad. When a military member is mobilized, the family must learn new ways to function as well as new ways of relating to one another. Roles may change dramatically as family members remaining at home must assume responsibilities normally handled by the deploying military member. These changes may challenge the family on every level—emotionally, physically, spiritually, and financially. Regardless of how much is done to keep things "normal", family life changes. The good news is that there are steps that can be taken to help everyone cope more effectively.

The family structure can be an important source of comfort for children during the challenges of deployment. It is important to maintain the daily routine and normal rules of the home to help cushion the impact of deployment that often includes changes in psychological equilibrium and disruption of children's behavior and coping skills. This booklet is intended to help parents build coping skills in their children during and after a military deployment. The goal is to bring needed support and understanding to the process and to maintain the family well being. Specific and practical guidelines for parents are presented in order to identify age-related reactions and focus on appropriate intervention strategies. By using the information and techniques in this booklet and adding your own unique perspective and expertise, you will become more knowledgeable and better prepared to assist your child during the deployment and transition to reunion and homecoming.

## BACKGROUND

The United States military is a total force made up of the Active and Reserve components including the Army, Army Reserve, Army National Guard, the Navy, Naval Reserve, the Marine Corps, Marine Corps Reserve, the Air Force, Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard, the Coast Guard and Coast Guard Reserve. Children of military members can be from the active duty or reserve components. They can live on or near a large military facility or they can come from geographically isolated communities or commands. They may have one or both parents in the military. The family may remain in their present location, move to be closer to relatives, or sent to live with relatives. Children of military members may have experienced numerous deployments or may be experiencing the stresses of deployment for the first time. The bottom line is that family life changes in times of deployment.

## DEPLOYMENT

Deployment is the name given to the movement of an individual or military unit within the United States or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission. The mission may be as routine as providing additional training or as dangerous as a war.

Deployments have three phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment (which includes reunion). Each phase has unique challenges that require proper interventions. Although the emotional impact of each phase of the deployment cycle has been carefully documented and studied, it is important to remember that no two children will react the same way. Individual responses depend on a variety of factors such as age, maturity, gender, parent-child relationships, and coping skills of the caregiver during separation.

Well-informed parents can help their children accept and have a better understanding of the separation from a loved one due to a deployment. Parents can anticipate and defuse potential problems by planning ahead and discussing the challenges of deployment with the entire family.

## PHASES OF DEPLOYMENT

### PRE-DEPLOYMENT PHASE

The period of pre-separation can be extremely stressful for parents and children. Family members may become preoccupied with the anticipation of loss of security and continuity. Children may not understand why the loved one is leaving. Very young children may become fearful that the parent will never return. They have not developed the skills to express their fears and feelings with words. When any change occurs, children may not be able to release their anxieties and not know where to go for support. Official notification that the family member will be deployed to another location in the US or abroad may be followed by feelings of general shock and disbelief. Family members will ponder questions such as "How could this happen to me?" The order, security and safety of their lives and the lives of their family members will feel temporarily shattered. During the pre-deployment phase, the deploying spouse has an ever-increased responsibility to the military; their time and energy is directed toward preparation for movement. During this phase, the remaining spouse and family members may feel overwhelmed. Children generally want things at home to "remain the same" and may be experiencing feelings of anger and guilt.

### DEPLOYMENT PHASE

When the deployment day arrives, there is usually family, unit, and community support. Military personnel are honored as dedicated, self-sacrificing and courageous. In wartime, there is an enormous mobilization during which family and community members provide a range of outward forms of support. As the troops leave and the emotional impact of that separation continues with the passage of time, the involvement of the community and those less affected by the event fades. The children and their families are left with feelings of loss and grief to manage on their own. The remaining spouse or guardians of children (including aunts, uncles, grandparents or family friends) struggle with new and increased roles and responsibilities. Conflicts may surface. During this phase, children and families of deployed military members reach different levels of adjustment. Some have developed or improved coping skills and are ready to resume their lives with renewed resiliency and hope. Some struggle with past problems and new conflicts. Others may continue to suffer from feelings of depression. Actively reaching out to children and families who are experiencing deployment difficulties during this phase can be helpful,

especially if support includes the teaching of new coping skills to deal with specific problems. The majority of families reach a "new normal" in daily life activities without the deployed spouse or parent.

## POST-DEPLOYMENT

Reunion is typically experienced with euphoria and joy when the military parent or spouse returns. Hidden beneath the surface are normal issues that must be re-addressed and resolved as the family works to re-incorporate the returned family member. The joyous return from the family's perspective may bring challenges to the new equilibrium established while the service member was gone. Spouses and children may have operated with a new independence that is not easily surrendered. Old and new conflicts may arise over roles and responsibilities. Family counseling, support and assistance may be needed to reconstruct family interaction. The expectation that the family will be just as it was before the deployment must be addressed. This phase brings different risks and challenges but also the opportunity to negotiate stronger and improved family relations.

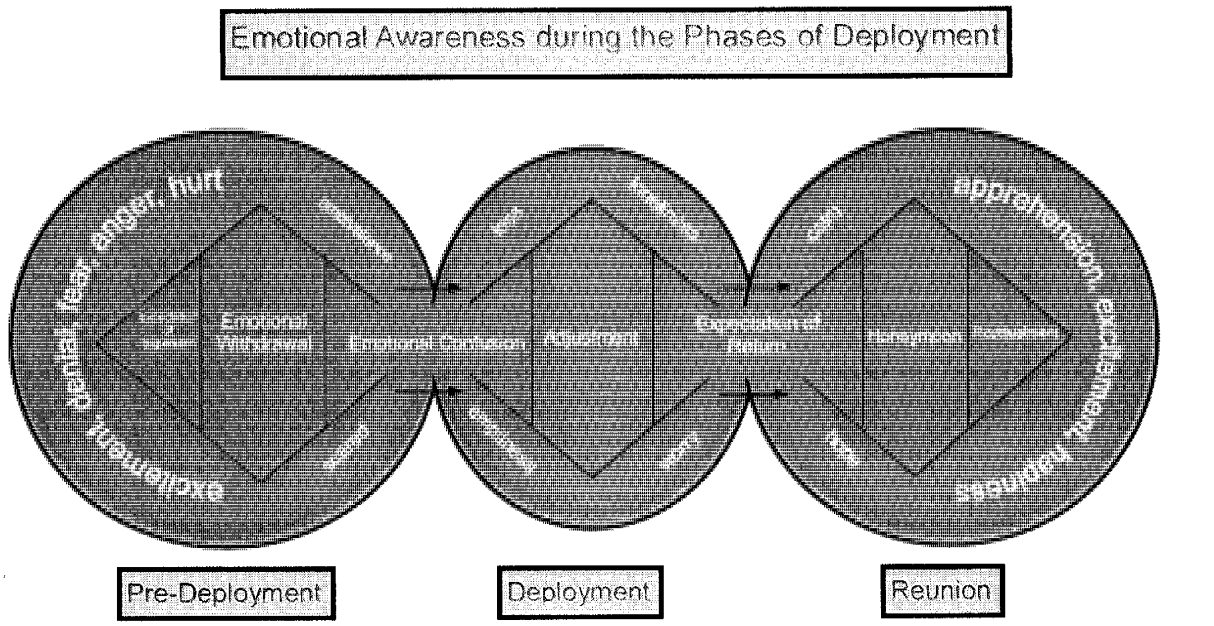
## IMPACT OF DEPLOYMENT

Deployments cause stress due to change for both the service member and the family that is left behind. Regardless of the length of the deployment, the family will have to redistribute family roles (e.g., managing finances, the maintenance of the house and car, and the care and discipline of children). Among young families, there is a strong tendency to return to the location of their families of origin. These moves are made to reduce costs and to add to the psychological and physical support needed to keep the family going.

You are going to react in many ways to your loved one's departure. This range of emotions is normal. The following illustration shows the common emotional cycles that people may go through because of a military separation. This provides an idea of how people often react in these situations, but it is important to remember that we are all individuals and every individual goes through this in his/her own way. The emotions experienced are determined by many factors—age, maturity, gender, and the relationship with other family members. It is also influenced by how others react. For example, a child will usually cope with the military separation better if the remaining parent and other family members are coping well and approaching it in a positive, supportive way. However, everyone will experience a range of emotions during this time. Remember that this is normal.

Many factors influence family adaptation to deployment. All families benefit from assistance and support in one or more areas but disorganized families with multiple pre-existing problems and/or troubled family members tend to be at higher risk for poor adjustments during deployments and separations.

**Emotional Cycles of Deployment:**




Source: Behavioral Health Strategies, LLC, November 2002

**During the entire deployment process, individuals experience numerous emotions.**

***Expectation for Separation:*** Usually occurs 6 to 8 weeks prior to deployment. Feelings during this phase of deployment can be characterized by excitement, denial, fear, or anger.

***Emotional Withdrawal:*** Usually occurs one week prior to deployment. Feelings you may begin experiencing could include ambivalence, fear, or anger. Once the actual separation has taken place, you will continue to experience a range of emotions that may change from one moment or one day to the next.

**Emotional phases or stages common during the actual deployment include:**

***Emotional Confusion:*** Occurs 1 to 6 weeks after departure. Usual feelings during this time are loss, emptiness, and abandonment.

***Adjustment:*** Fortunately you will learn to adjust, especially if you have worked through the preparations recommended for you in Pre-Deployment. Adjustment generally occurs during most of deployment. Some feelings you may have could range from hope, to worry, to calm, to loneliness. You may face periods of fear, loss or anger or other emotions common in pre-deployment, but these feelings should not be for prolonged periods of time. If they do tend to linger, ask for help from a professional trained in counseling.

***Expectation for Reunion:*** Approximately 6 to 8 weeks prior to homecoming, it is common to begin to have mixed feelings that include apprehension and worry as well as excitement and anticipation. You will find yourself thinking of things to worry about even though you are anxious for your loved one to return. This is only natural. Working through these worries will help make homecoming and the readjustment required less stressful for everyone–including you! Think positively. Use this time to plan how to prevent problems and how to handle them when they do arise. While your loved one is away, it is a good time to learn more about your emotions—how to recognize what you are feeling and why and how to manage these emotions positively. Recognize that although the initial reunion may be "perfect", things will not stay this way. This is often referred to as the "honeymoon" and, as with all honeymoons, it cannot last forever. The normal lifespan for the honeymoon phase is one day or until the first argument. When this happens, it is not "the end of the world". Recognize it for what it is—a return to normalcy. Also recognize that changes have occurred and both the loved ones who remained at home and the military member who has been away will need time to adjust. This usually takes a few weeks to occur and sometimes it will take longer. Manage your expectations.

***Honeymoon:*** Usually lasts until the first argument. You may experience feelings of euphoria, excitement, and confusion.

***Readjustment:*** Usually takes 1 to 6 weeks following the return. You may feel happy, excited, and satisfied. The following chart addresses common feelings of various family members as well as the behaviors that might be expected as a result of these emotions. Being aware of this helps you to be better prepared to handle problem behaviors when they occur. It also allows you the opportunity to prevent many unwanted behaviors by talking

through your feelings and coming up with more productive ways to deal with them.

## Family Adjustment

| ***Feelings and Behaviors that Affect the Family's Adjustment to Parent Absence:*** **PRE-DEPLOYMENT** | |
|---|---|
| Any combination of these **FEELINGS** | Could lead to any of these **BEHAVIORS** |
| **PARENTS:** | |
| Resentment<br>Anger<br>Guilt<br>Frustration<br>Anxiousness<br>Sadness | Arguing to establish distance/to express anger<br>Military member withholds notice to deploy until last minute<br>Lack of adequate preparation due to denial<br>Emotional and physical withdrawal |
| **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN:** | |
| Confusion<br>Surprise<br>Guilt | Clinging<br>Irritability<br>Sadness<br>Increase of attention-seeking behavior (positive and negative) |
| **ELEMENTARY CHILDREN:** | |
| Sadness<br>Anger<br>Separation anxiety<br>Guilt<br>May believe they caused parent's departure (even if discussed)<br>Feels lonely before military member leaves | Behavior problems<br>Regressive behaviors<br>Angry outbursts mixed with clinging |
| **ADOLESCENT CHILDREN:** | |
| Sadness<br>Fear of parent's rejection<br>Denial of feelings<br>Anger | Aloofness, don't-care attitude (arguing as defense against closeness or expression of anger)<br>Friends take on increased value |

Source: Hooah 4 Health, Deployment Guide

Most children and their families will be able to adjust to a "new normal" after the departure of a spouse or parent. However, some children who are fragile or who have had previous social or emotional problems may continue to have serious symptoms of stress and their ability to function in all areas (home, school, and social settings) remains compromised. The primary difference between a normal and serious reaction is one of degree and duration of change rather than in kind. It is important for parents to seek a referral for intensive individualized assessment and therapy for their children who after six to eight weeks:

- Continue to experience separation anxiety and do not want to leave their parent
- Continue to have high levels of emotional response such as continued crying and intense sadness
- Persevere in conversations and/or play about war and other deployment issues
- Continue to appear depressed, withdrawn and non-communicative
- Express violent or depressed feelings in "dark" drawings or writings
- Intentionally hurt or cut themselves or are at risk for hurting others
- Gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a period of weeks
- Discontinue taking care of their personal appearance
- Exhibit a possible drug or alcohol abuse problem
- Have not been able to resume normal activities
- Continue to have difficulty concentrating in school

## NORMAL REACTIONS TO STRESS

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from person to person. Reactions to stress are determined by an individual's age, developmental level, previous experience, temperament, personality, and the immediacy of the stress-related changes in their daily lives.

Possible reactions in children include:

- Feelings of anxiety, fear and worries about their own safety when the deployment of the family member occurs
- Worries about violence, harm, injury and death of deployed family member
- Common changes in behavior or exaggerated behavior
- War related play (young children)
- Fascination with war, death, and weapons (school-aged)
- Increased activity level
- Decreased concentration or attention
- Withdrawal
- Whininess, irritability or moodiness
- Angry outbursts
- Aggression
- Absenteeism or school phobia (In younger children)
- Accident prone
- Increased somatic complaints including headaches, stomachaches, or nausea
- Sleep or eating pattern changes
- Difficulty separating from the parent, or clinging to parent, caregiver or teacher
- Decline in school performance

## Ways to help...

Here are some ways to reduce the complexities caused by deployment for adults and children:

- Talk about what is going on and listen to what other family members are saying.
- Develop individual and family goals. Use them to develop/maintain family routines.
- Encourage all family members to share their feelings.
- Reassure each other of your love and support.
- Concentrate on what you can control: yourself and your behavior.
- Stay active—volunteer or take up a hobby.
- Spend time together as a family—do things that everyone can enjoy.
- Seek relevant information about the deployment.
- Try to see the deployment as a challenging opportunity for growth.
- Seek social support from friends, relatives, and families of others who have been deployed.
- Keep communication open.
- Check out rumors, and don't believe everything you hear.
- Get help if you need it.

As a parent, you play a critical role in the life of your children. You are a significant and valuable resource and support as the children affected by deployment learn to cope and also to grow during this time of change. We have provided some suggestions and strategies you can use at home. Remember to rely on your own wisdom and knowledge of childhood development to help your child and to assess their individual needs.

**MAINTAIN STRUCTURE** Maintain a predictable, structured home schedule with specific rules and consequences to provide support and consistency for your children. When children are distressed about news from their deployed parent or the circumstances of the deployment, you may want to find an appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs, and fears and have their feelings validated. It is important for children to believe that they are not alone emotionally and to be reassured that home is a safe and caring place.

**REINFORCE SAFETY AND SECURITY** After any discussion of a deployment related event, end the discussion with a focus on the child's safety and the safety measures being taken on behalf of their loved one. In the event of a deployment due to crisis or war, protect your children from unnecessary exposure to frightening situations and reminders. Limit adult-to-adult conversations about frightening details in front of your children. It is best not to have television news as a continual backdrop in your home.

**BE PATIENT** Expect some *temporary* slow down or disruption in doing chores and homework when a change affecting children occurs. Patience, understanding and providing extra help may be needed during this time.

**LISTEN** Be approachable, attentive and sensitive to the unique needs of children coping with deployment and family separations. Let the child know that they can speak with you about their questions and concerns. Respond to events in a calm and caring manner, answering questions in simple, direct terms. Take time to discuss the deployment and provide factual information. It is important to reduce fear and prevent rumors from spreading. By allowing children to ask questions, they can gain information about the event which helps take away some of their confusion. Talk about events in terms they can understand. Limit scary or hurtful communication. Some children may express themselves inappropriately; however, it is important to recognize that this is also a way of coping with overwhelming feelings of fear, anxiety and confusion.

**ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE FEELINGS** Help children develop a realistic understanding of deployment. Provide reassurance to children that the feelings of loss, anger, frustration or grief are normal responses to separation. Everyone reacts and adjusts to deployment and change at a different pace.

**REINFORCE ANGER MANAGEMENT** Expect some angry outbursts from children. While recognizing that it is natural to feel hurt and angry when someone we care about has left, there are appropriate ways to express anger without hurting yourself or taking your anger out on others. Reinforce age-appropriate anger management and adjustment interventions to ensure a climate of nonviolence and acceptance. Make an appointment with your family doctor, counselor, clergy or unit family assistance representative if a problem persists.

## Tips For Talking With Children About Deployment

**Parents need to focus on how to make the separation less traumatic for the children.** It is natural for children to be anxious and concerned upon hearing the news of the separation. The deployed parent's continued involvement with the children is most important.

**Do not put off telling children of the deployment**. Telling your children about the deployment early provides them with the opportunity to become involved in preparing for the separation. They will have many questions, which is positive—it means they're trying to make sense of what's happening and gain control over their environment. It allows them to begin expressing their worries, concerns, confusion, frustration, and so on. Withholding the information denies them this opportunity and can make the adjustment much more difficult.

**Both parents, if possible, should tell the children together.** This begins the reinforcement of the family unity despite separation—mom or dad is leaving to serve our country and it is not the child's fault. This also reinforces the parents' availability for questions and comfort. This will give you an opportunity to express how you feel about the separation and how you are handling it. It is important that children do not feel guilty about how they feel and continue to talk about their feelings so that you can be of help to them. Telling your children how you feel (within limits of common sense) can help them understand and verbalize their own reactions.

**Keep the discussion honest, straightforward, and factual.** Discuss the reasons for the assignment in terms that everyone understands. Once the separation is initiated, the children's adjustment is influenced positively if both parents are confident, if they are available to the children, and if the situation is as conflict free as possible.

## Suggested Parental Strategies For Preschool And Elementary-Aged Children

- Be open to conversations about deployment and war. One way is to use family times (such as mealtimes) to talk about what is happening in the world. Follow any conversation with a positive activity like a favorite story or music.

- Parents should serve as a "protective shield" against the images of war, particularly on television. Young children should not be exposed to the sights and sounds of war. Be mindful of leaving the television on or having newspapers open to images that may increase anxiety or worry.

- Young children see the world in very simple ways. Your answers to their questions about war should be just as simple and brief. Long answers may confuse young children and lead to increased worries.

- Keep to your everyday routines (at mealtimes, bedtime, etc.).

- Don't change family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.

- Be consistent about school/childcare pick-up times as well as times the family spends together. Separations may be difficult for a child, but keeping to routines can help.

- Help younger children make sense of what they hear from older children and siblings about the war. Ask them what they have heard and about any questions they may have.

- Monitor adult conversation about war. Young children have "big ears" and may overhear conversations they do not understand that can cause them to worry.

- Avoid loud or strong disagreements between adults when young children are present. Arguments about war may be frightening for them.

- Parents should spend extra time with their children and "stay connected." A little extra support may go a long way to helping them feel more secure and safe. Be sure to tell children they are loved.

- Establish a support system to express adult concerns and worries related to deployment so that your children are not inadvertently filling the "support" role.

- At home, calmly revisit emergency plans. Parents should develop back-up plans with relatives or friends to help with separation and reunification. For example, if a parent is unavailable to pick up a young child for school, be sure the child is aware of a relative or friend that may also pick him/her up at the end of the day. Be sure to let the child know when the parent will return home.

- Help children help take care of themselves by encouraging them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and diet. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and more physical activities. Be aware of any changes in children's sleep or eating habits that might suggest they are frightened or worried.

- Parents can help children take constructive steps to reach out or strengthen existing connections to their community. Many families will want to reinforce their family and religious supports and values during this time.

- Help children remain connected to the deployed family member:

    - Write cards and letters
    - Paint or draw pictures to send
    - Have pictures of the deployed family member in the children's room

- Together with your children, create a scrapbook of daily happenings to share with the deployed family member upon the return home.

## Suggested Parental Strategies For Middle School And High School–Aged Children

- Be open to conversations about deployment and war. One way is to use family times (such as mealtimes) to talk about what is happening in the world.

- Parents should monitor for over-exposure or excessive fascination with media coverage.

- Keep to your everyday routines (at mealtimes, bedtime, homework, extracurricular activities).

- Protect study time and times for teens to relax.

- Don't change family rules and consequences.

- Be available to help teens make sense of what they hear from peers, role models, and other adults.

- Monitor adult conversation about war. Teenagers may respond to adult conversations with intense views and feelings of their own.

- In times of increased anxiety, teens may seek to spend more time with their peers. While being respectful of this need, parents should be sure to give their teens some extra time as well, for example at bedtime.

- Teenagers may be more withdrawn and irritable. Be patient and calm when responding to these behaviors. An extra word of support or physical affection can help at these times.

- Establish a support system to express adult concerns and worries related to deployment so that your teens are not inadvertently filling the "support" role.

- Parents and teens should discuss and agree with back-up plans for relatives and friends to help if parents are not readily available. Be sure to let the teen know when you will be returning home.

- Help teens help take care of themselves by encouraging them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and diet. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and more physical activities. Be aware of any changes in teenagers' sleep, activity level, or eating habits that might suggest they are having difficulty with their thoughts and feelings about deployment and world events.

- Parents can help teenagers take constructive steps to reach out or strengthen existing connections to their community. Many families will want to reinforce their family and religious supports and values during this time.

- Reinforce on-going community activities (e.g., volunteer activities at food banks, nursing homes, etc.).

- Help teenagers to keep a positive view of their futures by studying, participating in their extracurricular activities, and setting goals.

- Encourage teenagers to express their thoughts and feelings through keeping a diary or journal.

- Help children remain connected to the deployed family member:

    - Write cards and letters
    - Have pictures of the deployed family member in the teenager's room

- Together with your teenager, create a scrapbook of daily happenings to share with the deployed family member upon the return home.

## Return and Reunion

As much as you are looking forward to having your loved one return home and as much as he/she is looking forward to returning, reunions are not all bliss. If you think that is the case, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Homecoming and reunion can be just as stressful as the separation itself. Readjustment will require time. You have both had new and different experiences, many of which may not have been pleasant. The military member may have seen and experienced war first hand for the first time, while you have struggled with loneliness, fear and worry taking care of the family and problems that you have not had to face alone before.

Once again it is important to be prepared. Taking steps toward managing expectations on the part of everyone without taking away from the joy of reuniting the family is critical. Such preparation will go a long way toward ensuring that the homecoming is a positive experience for everyone and lay the foundation for the reintegration to occur more smoothly. The following tips will be helpful as you make your plans!

### Tips for a Successful Reunion

**Keep in touch with reality.** Recognize that from the moment you are separated from the person you care about, you may begin to build up an image of that person in your mind. Imperfections tend to fade and all of the individual's positive traits come to the forefront. The military member may remember their family as they appear in the photograph he/she carries–without blemish. Memories of everyday life such as making ends meet, occasional disagreements, and disciplining the children, begin to fade from everyone's mind. The reunion is seen as the solution to all problems. "Once we are together again, everything will be perfect." However, reality rarely has a chance to live up to the high expectations you may have set in your minds. This does not mean that the reunion will be filled with disappointment. Homecomings can be very happy occasions as long as all family members make an effort to be as realistic as possible. If the tendency to not pick up after oneself around the house occurred before the separation, that habit probably has not miraculously disappeared. If a weight problem existed prior to the separation, do not expect a fifty-pound loss to have occurred during the separation. If one of the children was experiencing a problem at school, do not expect the problem to disappear at reunion time. In addition, everyone must be prepared for change to have

occurred. Dealing with change in a positive way can make the readjustment and the process of returning to "normalcy" following a long separation go more smoothly. This means anticipating change and not allowing it to be magnified and become divisive. Individuals change with the experiences they have and simply as a result of time. Expect change in each other. During the separation, all members of the family will have had different experiences and these experiences are now a part of their history and may color how they look at and deal with things. The returning soldier will have experienced the harsh realities of war that even with the upfront media coverage, no one remaining at home can imagine. Those who remained at home will have (if only out of necessity) experienced a level of independence they may not have experienced before. The spouse has had to make decisions about such things as what the children are allowed to do, finances, and home repairs. The children have learned to depend on the parent who has been with them and to go to them for permission or assistance when needed.

Remember—talking to one another and working through the everyday challenges that family life presents are what is important. This does not all have to be accomplished on the day of the family reunion. Give yourselves some time to enjoy one another. Everyone needs to get reacquainted before problem solving begins.

**Military Member:**
Don't feel like you need to rush things. Your experiences have resulted in changes in you and your family's experiences have resulted in changes in them as well. "Normal" will need to be redefined. Take your time and ease yourself back into the family. If you try to immediately "take charge", your spouse and family may feel that you did not think that they were doing a good job while you were away. Feelings of resentment will surface. See yourself as a "Special Guest" for a while. Allow them the opportunity to do things for you. This will let them show how glad they are to have you back as well as to demonstrate their new skills. You will see that some things will change naturally as a result of your presence in the family. If you disagree about the way other things have been handled, wait a few days and discuss it openly with your spouse.

Do not immediately resume the tasks you did before without discussing it with your spouse. Your spouse will probably welcome the help but may have come up with their own system that is working and not want to have it

immediately changed. For example, if you formerly handled the bills, do not try to take over the finances immediately. A complete interrogation regarding the state of the checkbook as soon as you walk through the door is bound to create hostility. Set aside some time when things have calmed down to review the financial situation with your spouse. Take it easy with the children in terms of discipline. For a while, stick with the rules your spouse has established during your absence. Immediately playing the "heavy" will not open up opportunities for you and the children to get to know one another again. It is not difficult to understand why some children are afraid of the returning parent if all they have to look forward to is "a changing of the guard." On the other hand, sometimes it is easy to spoil your children. If you have not seen them for a long period of time or you are home for only short periods of time, you may find yourself not wanting to discipline them. You are probably eager to make up for the time you were unable to spend with them. This is certainly understandable. But do not put your spouse in the position of constantly playing the "heavy" while you have all the fun with the children. Do not be surprised if your spouse is a little envious in some ways. Your life may look very exciting compared to the job of "keeping the home fires burning." Surprise your spouse with a gift when you return from a new place. This way they can show off their "treasures" from different states or countries and cultures and share in your experiences. The bottom line is to expect your spouse to have changed. Neither of you is the same person you were a few months ago, or even a few weeks ago. The main adjustment for military families after a separation is the change in roles. Your spouse has learned to cope alone as a matter of survival. Out of necessity, some of your roles have been taken over in order to compensate for your absence. Try not to be threatened if you find an independent person when you return home. The fact that your spouse can cope without you does not necessarily mean that he or she cares about you any less or does not need you.

**Spouse:**

Keep in mind that your spouse has been operating in a regimented environment with a daily routine. Transition to family life takes a while. In some instances, your spouse might be rebellious against any kind of schedule or preplanned activity you have arranged. Be patient! At first there might also be some trouble sleeping soundly throughout the night. Making the transition from barracks-style living to home living (especially if your spouse has been working rotating shifts or irregular hours) may take some time. Do not take it personally if you find your spouse daydreaming

about deployment issues. Your spouse has been immersed in a totally different environment while away from home. It takes a while to let go of that world, even when a spouse is relieved to be back home with the family. You might find that your spouse is either surprised or even hurt that you have been able to manage everything so well alone. Try not to get defensive. Everyone wants to feel needed. Reassure your partner that although you are capable of handling the household and family on your own, you need companionship and emotional support. Point out that it also makes life a lot easier when you have someone with whom you can share these responsibilities.

**Children:**
Some children will keep their distance from the returning parent for a while. They may still have unresolved feelings of anger toward that individual for leaving them, and are not ready to allow that parent to be part of their lives yet. They may have to be "courted" for a while until they feel comfortable again. Allow them the time and space they need. Other children may become "clingers." Each time the parent disappears from sight for a few moments, they think the adult has gone away from home again. As a result they tend to hold on for dear life and not let the parent out of their sight. Be patient. This will pass with time as they see you leave and return again. At reunion time, Dad could be meeting his new infant son or daughter for the first time. This can be quite an emotional experience for everyone, including the infant. Parents—do not feel that you have to thrust a crying infant into the arms of the returning member. Do not feel overwhelming rejection if your infant will not come to you at first. Give the child some time. Infants are people too, and they need time to develop trust before they feel comfortable with a new adult in their lives. Plan to spend some time individually with each one of your children by doing some activity that is special to them. This allows the parent to get reacquainted with each child in a way that is most comfortable for that particular child. It also makes children feel special and appreciated for their individuality. Expect your children to have changed both physically and emotionally. Sometimes the changes are barely noticeable from day to day, but if you go away, you might discover upon your return that your toddler is walking, your fourth grader has learned the multiplication tables, and your teenage daughter has a new boyfriend.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### HOW OFTEN DO DEPLOYMENTS OCCUR?

Although it is impossible to predict the number of deployments that will occur during a time of war and terrorism or how long these deployments may last, it is almost certain that one or more deployments may occur in times of war or terrorist events.

### HOW DO MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS AFFECT A FAMILY?

A deployment that affects a family impacts each member in unique ways. Therefore, families need to be respectful of these differences. Parents may notice increased irritability between children and need to help support each child.

### HOW DO CHILDREN REACT TO DEPLOYMENT?

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from child to child. Previous experiences or lack of experience with deployment, temperament, personality and the child's assessment of danger to their family member determine the child's reactions. Nonetheless, some commonalities exist when lives are disrupted by sudden separations and dramatic family changes.

- **Loss of Stability:** Deployments interrupt the normal order and routine of daily life. Lack of stability is very threatening. Deployments can upset the equilibrium for extended periods of time. In the mind of the child, if this sudden change can occur, then it is possible that other unpredictable events might also transpire.

- **Loss of Control:** By their very nature, deployments represent events over which the child has no control. Lack of control over happenings that impact daily life can produce an overwhelming feeling in children.

- **Individual Reactions:** Children's immediate reaction to deployment often includes a fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them and their family members, to a degree that may be judged by adults as unreasonable. However,

young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and the outcome of the deployment as it relates to them and their daily lives.

Conversely, for a variety of reasons, some children may express relief that the family member has left the family unit. The deployment may put an end to pre-existing family tension or dysfunction or it may represent the finality of an action that resolves the child's anxiety, fear and uncertainty about when the separation will occur.

However children express their reactions, these provide opportunities for children and adults to understand their respective thoughts and feelings and marks a beginning point to work toward a new adjustment in the family.

## WHAT ARE COMMON STRESS REACTIONS?

Acute reactions to separation generally appear within the first 24 to 48 hours. In the two weeks after the deployment, the reactions may change. Behaviors will vary depending upon the age and developmental maturity of the child. It is also important to note that it is possible for weeks or months to pass before a delayed reaction will become apparent and cause problems. (See Normal Reactions to Stress section)

## WHEN SHOULD A REFERRAL TO A SCHOOL COUNSELOR, PSYCHOLOGIST OR SOCIAL WORKER BE MADE?

If symptoms persist over several weeks or seem extreme, parents should seek appropriate counseling for the child and/or the family. Parents can coordinate with the child's school site administrator and support staff to ensure that the appropriate mental health referrals are recommended within the school resources. Support staff members may include the school nurse, school psychologist, school social worker and crisis intervention team member.

The duration and intensity of stress reactions vary greatly depending on the level of impact on the child and family. These emotional surges may pass more quickly with the support of loved ones, friends, social contacts and military affiliations. If the separation is extremely traumatic, the need for

counseling is very normal and sometimes necessary for healing and adjustment to take place. Counseling does not indicate that a person is mentally ill. It shows that a person is strong enough to accept help with the goal of learning how to manage changes in a constructive way.

### CAN DEPLOYMENT AND THE ADJUSTMENT PERIOD AFTER DEPLOYMENT AFFECT LEARNING?

Deployment and the period after deployment affect learning by creating instability in the lives of individual children as well as the classroom. Stressed children have difficulty concentrating, learning new concepts and controlling emotional expression. Some children may become very quiet and withdrawn while others may become disruptive and overly active. Their academic functioning may be impaired. Studies have shown that prolonged stress alters brain chemistry and function, causing children to have difficulty with concentration, memory, behavior and control of emotions.

### HOW CAN MY CHILD'S SCHOOL COUNSELOR, NURSE, PSYCHOLOGIST OR SOCIAL WORKER HELP?

School or community-based health and mental health professionals can help identify the problem and determine the degree of impact on children and on the school. It is important that they be trained to assess the student's situation and provide supportive interventions that will assist in the student's adjustment. They can also determine if additional services may be needed from district, community or military sources and can make those referrals.

### AS A PARENT, WHAT KINDS OF TRAINING SHOULD I ENCOURAGE FOR MY CHILD'S SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS?

- School on-site deployment awareness training
- Consultation with school liaisons from the military services
- Specialized assessment and intervention training for staff
- Resource mapping
- Referral follow-up

Many of these services are available to schools through the Family Service Centers on nearby installations.

## CONCLUSION

This booklet is designed to meet the needs expressed by parents and military leaders as well as family services professionals for background information and intervention strategies to support the military child during mobilization and deployment.

The information included in this booklet is not intended to answer all questions related to mobilization, deployment, transition, reunion and re-adjustment. There are a variety of additional resources and deployment support services available at each of the armed services websites (active duty, reserve and National Guard), any military base, or your local community counseling services. The following section lists online resources offering further information.

## HELPFUL WEBSITES AND LINKS

Army: **www.goacs.org** *(click on family readiness)*
Navy: **www.lifelines2000.org** *(click on deployment readiness)*
Marine Corps: **www.usmc-mccs.org** *(click on deployment information)*
Air Force: **www.afcrossroads.com** *(click on family separation)*
National Guard: **www.guardfamily.org**
National Guard Youth Site: **www.guardfamilyyouth.org**
Reserves: **www.defenselink.mil/ra/** *(click on family readiness)*
National Military Families Association: **www.nmfa.org**
Military Child Education Coalition:
**www.militarychild.org/pdf_files/deploymentr2.pdf**
National Children, Youth and Families at Risk Initiative: **www.cyfernet.org**

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