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Supporting Your Military Children Through the Deployment Cycle

As parents, we want to be good role models for our children. When word of a deployment comes, you'll get a chance to show your kids what it takes to be a good guardian of your family.

Your children will be looking at your lead and leaning on your strength. Here are steps you can take to create your own deployment plan to help your kids through the deployment cycle.

Deployment plan for your kids: before deployment

While you and your partner are **planning your deployment** — dealing with deployment logistics, finances and mission prep — as a parent you'll also want to prepare your children.

Prepare for questions and emotions your children may have. Here are some tips:

- Talk to other parents who have deployed to get a sense of questions kids ask, how to respond and how much to share.
- Think about the best ways to explain military deployment to your own children — factoring in their ages, their personalities and how they respond to surprises.
- Consider reaching out to your Military and Family Support Center, a military and family life counselor or chaplain; contact Military OneSource 800-342-9647.
- Alert your children's schools, teachers and coaches about your upcoming deployment, so they have insight of the changes facing your family.

Prepare your children. Remember, children may not understand why a parent is leaving and they may be afraid about the change. When you talk with your kids:

- Talk to them in a way they'll understand — what is deployment and why your job is taking them away. Much of this is based on their age and what they can absorb.
- Let your kids ask questions, and answer questions as simply and honestly as you can.
- Reassure your children that things will stay as routine as possible at home.
- Stay positive and upbeat, and assure them that you love them very much.
- Spend one-on-one time with each child before you deploy.
- Plan how you'll keep in touch with them while you are deployed, and how they can stay in touch with you. Alert them that sometimes they may not hear from you for a few days.
- Discuss potential changes to household routines, the importance of listening to the parent at home and that household rules remain the same.

- Introduce them to [Military Kids Connect](#)—an online community for military children (ages 6 to 17) that provides access to age-appropriate resources to support them in dealing with deployment and other aspects of military life—or order the video [“Military Youth Coping with Separation: When Family Members Deploy.”](#) For younger children, order Sesame Workshop’s [“Talk, Listen, Connect: Deployments, Homecomings, Changes”](#) to get support for your preschooler from Elmo and friends.
- Ask school-age kids to help you pack, and make sure they get a chance to say goodbye, but keep the goodbyes brief.

Expect your kids to have differing reactions to the news. They may be moody, irritable, act out and test the limits. Remember, this is normal. Cut them some slack. It’s your job to remain positive and be a role model.

During deployment

Kids are kids and with one parent gone, you can expect your children to test the limits. As the deployed parent, you need to provide as much backup to your partner as possible, even if you’re half way around the world.

- **If you’re deployed**, stay in regular contact as much as possible. Let your family know that even though there will be times you can’t be in contact; you think of them daily. Send letters or emails, and if you have more than one child, send each personalized notes when you can. Stay connected, as it will make your transition back easier.
- **If you are at home**, stick to your usual schedule as much as possible, and create new routines for sending care packages or writing letters. Set aside a time to help children discuss what they hear on the news or from other kids.
- **Maintain household rules.** Don’t let your kids get away with behaviors you normally would not tolerate. Heads up to deployed spouses: back up your partner who is maintaining order on the home front.

After deployment

The more effort you put in before and during deployment in helping your kids adjust to the changes, the easier the transition back will likely be. Even with preparation, your children may have a mix of emotions upon a deployed parent’s return.

- **Tread lightly upon your return.** The returning parent can help make re-entry smoother for the family by staying close to home in the days and weeks upon arrival home. Watch out for implementing big changes shortly after you’re return.
- **Ease back into routines.** If you’re the parent who remained home, don’t dump chores and responsibilities on your returning partner. Allow some space and over time step up the involvement of the returning parent with meals, bedtime routines, play and discipline.
- **Don’t freak out if your kids may need some alone time.** Remember, adults need this too.

Here’s more helpful advice [preparing your children for deployment](#). At any point of the deployment cycle, you can turn to Military OneSource for help. We offer special programs to help you and your family, including the Child and Youth Behavioral Military and Family Life Counseling Program services. With Military OneSource, you have access to free, confidential non-medical counseling if you or your children need to talk during any part of the deployment cycle.

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