Preparing for deployment: What young children need

It should come as no surprise that one of the most difficult experiences that military families regularly face is the separation of deployment. What may be surprising, though, is that the months leading up to deployment can be difficult for families, too.

In order to understand the stress of this time for young children, first look at the impact of preparing for deployment on their parents.

Preparing to leave: Parents’ experience

Most parents will experience many, if not all, of the following while preparing for deployment:

LOTS to do!

During this time, service members and their spouses must attend to many, many financial, legal, and other administrative affairs required by the military. In addition, the family may also face decisions to ensure that the family’s needs are met while the service member is deployed, such as relocating to be nearer to extended family.

Distancing of the service member.

As the deployment draws near, the service member often spends time away from the family for training and preparation with his or her unit. He or she begins bonding with the other unit members and focusing on the upcoming mission. Though necessary for the service member, the result for the family is psychologically distancing even when he or she is at home.

Making the most of the time together.

On the other hand, the spouse may very well be trying to make the most out of the final weeks and days together, both relationally and practically. Spouses create long “honey-do” lists for the service member and plan memorable occasions together as a couple or family before the long separation.

More conflict.

With one parent pulling away and the other trying to hold tighter, all while under the pressure of a mile-long “to-do” list, it’s no wonder that big arguments between couples are very common in the final days before departure.

Anxiety.

Underlying everything for both parents is worry about what will happen once the service member is deployed. The worries that each wrestles with are too numerous to list here but the point to remember is that anxiety about the future creates an underlying level of stress that makes everything else harder.

Preparing to leave: Children’s experience

All children, regardless of age, will pick up on the emotional state of their parents. The stressors that parents experience as they prepare for deployment inevitably show in their faces, voices and behaviors, and even the youngest of children notices. These changes in their parents usually cause feelings of confusion and insecurity in young children, which they express in their behavior and mood. Although all of the behaviors listed below are common in distressed children, the specific behaviors you might see in a particular child depend on many factors, including the child’s temperament.

Infants:

- more fussy, more difficult to soothe
- changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- more fear of separation
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Toddlers and twos:
• more clinginess
• loss of recently gained skills and return to earlier behaviors
• increase in tantrums and opposition
• changes in appetite, disrupted sleep

Preschoolers:
• withdrawing, loss of interest in playful activities
• irritability, easily angered, increase in conflicts with others
• attention-getting behaviors
• regressing in developmental skills
• decreased attention, motivation, self-control
• fears, both related and unrelated to the deploying parent

Meeting the child’s needs

Child care providers can play a very helpful role in providing emotional support to children through this difficult time. The first step is to pay attention to changes in the child’s behavior. Notice behavior patterns or situations that are especially difficult. Provide security by offering predictability, comfort and stability. Send intentional messages, through words and actions, that the provider is a safe person on whom he can depend for comfort and structure, no matter how he’s feeling or acting. Offer assistance when he is having trouble managing his emotions and behavior or having a hard time with attention or thinking. Many of the abilities he demonstrated and situations he handled well a month ago are now too difficult because his brain is busy coping with the emotional load. He needs patient assistance from caregivers, at least for now. Finally, allow a comfort item. Whether it’s a parent’s photo or t-shirt or a toy that the parent gave him, allowing him to bring his comfort item to child care and to access it when he’s feeling blue will let him know that it’s okay to feel sad and that providers care about helping him feel better.

Supporting parents

By finding ways of helping parents cope with this difficult time, caregivers help the whole family. One of the easiest ways to support them is to share resources. There are many informative publications and web sites that can help parents know what to expect, how to cope, and what services and programs are available to help throughout the deployment cycle, including pre-deployment. Don’t assume parents know about them and don’t be shy about sharing them frequently and in a variety of ways (electronically, in a “parent library,” etc.).

Preparing to say good-bye to a service member who is deploying is an emotionally draining, stressful time for every family member. As the family’s child care provider, you can play a tremendous role in helping the children cope and offering support to the whole family.

Resources


The emotional cycle of deployment: