



Family Guidebook





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A Note From Trevor...

I have been working with military kids for many years, speaking to them about issues they face, such as friendships, fears, and deployment. I have literally spoken to thousands of children, and after each presentation, kids have come up to me with relief in their eyes to tell someone how deployment has affected their lives. The more we speak to kids, the more we realize how much help they need in dealing with the tough issues of deployment. Most importantly, we need to validate their feelings and listen to what they are asking for instead of telling them what we think they need to hear.

This guidebook has been created to help you support children and to help them cope with the unique challenges they face before, during, and after deployment. It provides steps and activities that will help children prepare for all aspects of deployment.

I am touched by the pain and hardships these children are going through, and I am inspired by the families who have embraced deployment and found ways to work through it. I am very proud and honored to be able to work with military children, and I'm happy to share what I have learned with you. With that in mind, I believe that the contents of this guidebook will be extremely helpful to you as you provide love and support to your amazing military kids.

Trevor Romain

Stress is Normal

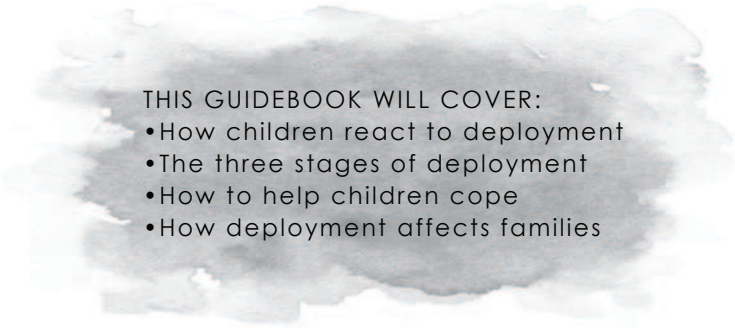
Deployment is a unique challenge faced by military families. Every year, thousands of families deal with the difficulties of deployment and learn to overcome these challenges. While it is a stressful time, and it is normal to feel overwhelmed, the best way to meet and overcome these challenges is to prepare and cope as a family.

Kids, especially, can have a hard time coping. They go through their own stress and worries during deployment and need your help. By learning what to expect and what difficulties children may face, you can help them make it through this tough time and use this experience to come together and grow stronger as a family.

How to Use this Guidebook

The goal of this guidebook is to support parents and caregivers as they help their children handle deployment. There are some common ways deployment can affect kids, and there are some simple steps you can take to prepare them for the challenges ahead. Learning what to look for and knowing how to react can be a great help.

While not everyone will experience the stress of deployment in the same way, a good first step is to be flexible and accept that things will change.



THIS GUIDEBOOK WILL COVER:

- How children react to deployment
- The three stages of deployment
- How to help children cope
- How deployment affects families

My husband laid out all his gear on the bed and had the kids check each item off the list. The kids took the responsibility of ensuring that he didn't forget anything important very seriously.

—Parent, Ramstein Air Base



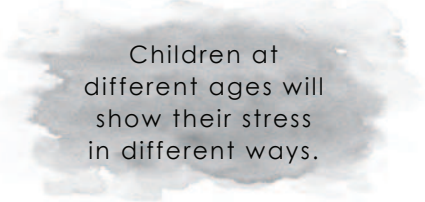
How Children React to Deployment

It is common for children to feel pride in their parent's service and in being part of a military family. They may even feel like they're also serving. It is important to know that a kid's age has a lot to do with how they will react. **No matter how old a child is, deployment challenges his or her basic needs: safety, security, and family.**

Infants and Toddlers

Why is the baby crying? They may not understand what is going on, but even as young as they are, infants and toddlers feel stress.

Changes to their routine, not getting enough attention, and missing their deployed parent can all upset a toddler. Younger children also pick up on the emotions of the adults around them. And because they haven't developed communication skills, it's tough to know what's bothering them.



Children at different ages will show their stress in different ways.

Common Reactions

- Increased clinginess
- Easily upset and harder to comfort
- Fear of separation from loved ones
- Increased aggressive behavior
- Changes in eating or sleeping
- Crying and whining

Preschoolers

Why is Mommy leaving? When is Daddy going to come home? What did I do wrong? Preschoolers won't understand what's going on. This can lead to frustration and confusion. What they see and hear from news coverage and adult conversations will add to their confusion. Preschoolers may need to be reassured that it's not their fault the parent is leaving. They will worry about the safety of the deployed parent and, for them, the separation will feel longer.

Common Reactions

- Returning to younger behaviors (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting)
- Emotional outbursts, tantrums, and testing limits
- Fear of separation from loved ones
- Increased aggressive behavior towards others
- Changes in eating or sleeping behavior
- Increased clinginess
- Easily upset and harder to comfort

School-Age Children

I finished my homework, can I go out and play? School-age children can better understand deployment-related issues but haven't developed the coping skills to deal with them. The absence and concern for their mother or father and the changes at home can be overwhelming. They may want to do things to help—like not bother you with their problems or try to take on too much—but this could also lead to frustration.

Common Reactions

- Acting out, angry outbursts
- Problems at school
- Increased cries for attention
- Withdrawn, won't open up
- Returning to younger behaviors
- Fear of separation from loved ones
- Changes in eating or sleeping

Adolescents

Why doesn't anyone understand me? Being a teenager is already stressful. With one parent away, they'll have to "grow up" and accept more responsibilities. They may seem mature, but teens don't have the experience of adults. They may have trouble dealing with the situation, their new role in the family, and other teen issues.

Common Reactions

- Problems at school
- Negative, risk-taking behavior
- More withdrawn, distant
- Increased focus on friends
- Changes in eating or sleeping
- Moodiness

Take Deployment One Stage at a Time

It's best to break deployment down into three stages: pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration. Each stage has its own challenges and ways to cope.



Pre-Deployment

The lead up to deployment can be the most confusing time for your family, but it is also the most important. There are a lot of things you have to figure out and take care of before the deployment date. Making decisions and plans for the family is easier with both parents supporting each other. **Now is when you can talk about the deployment as a family. Now is when you can come up with a plan.**

You will be dealing with your own stress, but your kids will be looking to you for help. Let them know change is ahead. You can say, "Our family will face changes. I am nervous and sad, too. We can help each other through this." Along with their parent leaving, the changes to their routine will affect your child's sense of safety and security.

Kids take cues from their parents. If you are stressed or upset, your kids will pick up on that and may get stressed or upset too.

What kids may be feeling: Anger, sadness, fear, confusion, overwhelmed, anxiety, confidence, and pride.

Deployment

When the service member is deployed, everything hits home. The separation is now real. The concern for their safety grows. The spouse at home is now a single caregiver and the family members take on new roles and responsibilities.

What kids may be feeling: Loneliness and loss, fear, uncertainty, confusion, guilt, and self-reliance.

Reunion and Reintegration

From the time they were deployed, you've been waiting for them to come home. The return should be a celebration. But don't be surprised to find that it is not completely without its own issues. This is a time of transition. The family has to adjust to being together again.

What kids may be feeling: Awkwardness, resentment, excitement, and relief.

Remember that it
takes time to re-establish
relationships.

When you need a little
extra love from your
parent just ask for it.

— High School Student,
Ramstein Air Base



How to Help Children Cope



Deployment is full of challenges: helping kids stay connected to their deployed parent, helping them deal with their stress, and getting them to help around the house. It may seem like more than you can handle, but there are specific things you can do to support children through each stage of deployment.

During Pre-Deployment

TALK AND LISTEN

Be honest with children and talk to them about what is going to happen. Share information about the deployment—when it will start, where they will serve, and how long it will last.

- Try to give kids enough time to process what is happening in case they have any questions.
- Communication works both ways, so be sure to **listen to your children** and answer their questions the best you can.
- Have the service member spend quality time with each child before being deployed in case they have anything they want to say or ask.

PLAN

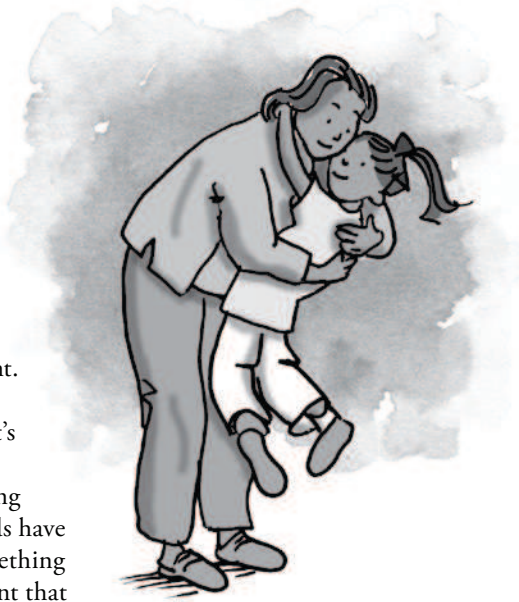
From bills and budgets to the school car pool and getting help from family and friends, the more you plan before deployment the easier the process will be.

- Not everything will go as planned. Surprises happen, so be flexible.
- Birthdays, first haircuts, graduations, and school plays: the service member will miss some things while he or she is away. Look at a calendar and have children record audio and video messages for the things he or she will miss.
- A plan can be **a source of comfort to both the parents and children.**

INVOLVE THE KIDS

Give kids tasks and responsibilities. It will not only give them something to do to take their mind off their stress and worry, but it will also help them develop self-reliance in a situation that is out of their control.

- Try to give children reminders of their parent. Ask children if there is anything of their parent's that is special that they would like to keep during the deployment. Let kids have photos, or a hat, or something else linked to their parent that they can keep as their own.



Tips for Younger Children

- Put pictures up around the house of the deployed parent so your kids will continue to see him or her.
- Do things that remind kids of their parent. Make the deployed parent's favorite meal or read their favorite bedtime story.

Tips for School-Age and Adolescent Children

- Talk to older kids about what you need from them during this time. Be sure to ask them what they need as well.
- Older kids may feel more comfortable writing down their feelings rather than talking about them. Encourage them to keep a journal or to send you notes or emails.
- Ask teens for their help, but don't treat them like another parent.

During Deployment

COMMUNICATION

Talking and sharing with your children can help them deal with their feelings. Be sure to use your best judgment on what information to share with your kids. Make sure it's okay for their age.

- Don't let kids bottle up their emotions. Make sure they have someone to talk to. Drawing and journaling are also good ways to release their pent-up emotions.

- Keeping kids informed can ease their stress and uncertainty.
- Be available. Listen to what children say and ask. To keep them from just answering “I’m fine,” ask them open ended questions like, “How are you able to stay focused?” or “What works best for you when you feel sad or lonely?”
- Plan to give special, individual attention to each child. This time can be used to comfort and reassure the child. You can also just listen to whatever your child might be feeling.
- Be aware of news reports and adult conversations. Don’t keep the television tuned to constant news coverage. If something happens, talk about it as a family.

ROUTINES AND CONSISTENCY

Normal schedules will help kids deal with stress and restore their feelings of security and safety.

- Keep regular schedules for meals, homework, school, and bedtimes. Sticking to routines gives kids much needed structure.
- It may not be possible to keep all the old routines, so build new routines if necessary.
- When it comes to disciplining your children, be consistent. Try to find a good balance between being too strict and being too soft. Consequences should be fair. And don’t forget to reward them for good behavior!



MAINTAINING THE BOND

Keeping a child’s connection to their deployed parent is one of the toughest challenges during deployment, but it is also one of the most rewarding for both the parent and the child. It may take some creativity and planning, but staying connected is one of the best ways to help children overcome many of the issues of deployment.

- Try to keep a regular time for the deployed parent to call or email home. The anticipation and excitement of the next phone call, letter, or email will keep the deployed parent in a child’s thoughts.
- Talk about the deployed parent every day. Share memories and photo albums. Remind children of their deployed parent’s favorite color or favorite food. Take any opportunity to tell kids that their parent loves and misses them.

- A map is a handy way to show kids where the deployed parent will be serving.
- Build care packages as a family. Have everyone take part, but be sure to remind children that they may not hear back right away.

Tips for Younger Children

- The service member can prepare videos of them reading stories to their children. They can also take photos with their children in familiar places. This gives them the reminders they need to maintain a bond with their deployed parent.
- Have a calendar counting down to when the deployed parent is expected to come home. Seeing the days will help young children keep track of the time. Remind them that the return date could change so they aren't surprised if it does.
- Have your children make drawings and pictures and include them in letters and packages to the deployed parent.
- Young children can have a hard time saying what they feel. Drawing, painting, or play acting can help them work through these feelings.

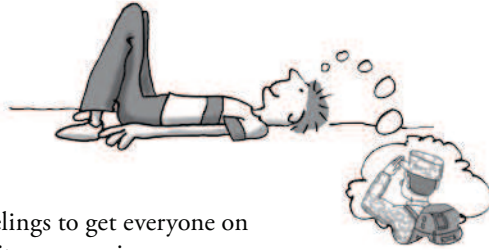
Tips for School-Age and Adolescent Children

- Being in a military family is part of a child's identity and a source of pride. Discuss with children how they can best serve the family while their parent is on active duty. Chores, school, and new responsibilities can become ways for children to regain some control.
- Have children keep diaries, journals, or scrapbooks during the deployment. They can share these with their deployed parent when they get home.
- Let older children call, mail letters, or email the deployed parent on their own. Having one-on-one access to their deployed parent—to ask for advice or for support—keeps their bond strong.
- Be available to your kids. Make a habit of telling them you are there for them if they need to talk.

During Reunion & Reintegration

KEEP TALKING

Talking about possible issues before the homecoming can help your family get ready to be together again.



- Share thoughts and feelings to get everyone on the same page and limit any surprises.
- When it gets close to the end of the deployment, include kids in the planning of the homecoming. Ask them for ideas. Have them make signs or posters.

BE REALISTIC

You may hope that everything will instantly be fine when everyone is back together again. But many families are surprised when problems arise.

- Keep in mind that any problems you had before the deployment may come up again now that you are together.
- Don't expect that things will go back to exactly the way they were before.
- Acknowledging that things have changed is an important step.

UNDERSTANDING

Talking about problems is one thing, dealing with them is another. Patience, understanding, and flexibility will help your family reconnect.

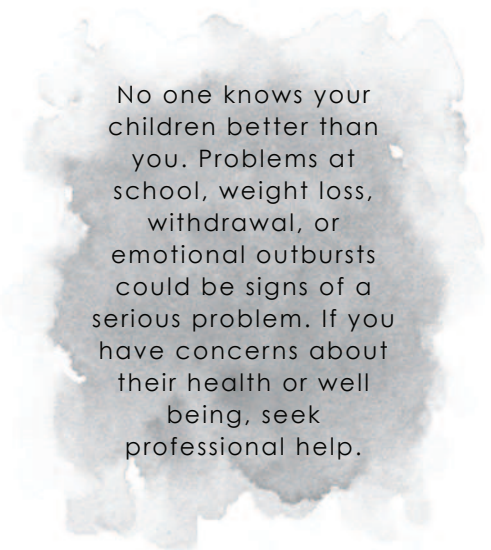
- The returning service member may be jet-lagged. It can take several days of waiting for available seats and sleeping in airports before they finally reach their destination. They'll need time and sleep before they can fully appreciate being home.
- A lot of families have to work at being together again. Stay available, continue to talk, and encourage kids to let you know if they're having trouble.
- **Be patient.** Give each family member the time they need to readjust.

Tips for Younger Children

- Younger children may have their own ideas about what will happen when their parent returns: everything will be as it was before, everything will be easier, and there will be no more problems. Remind them that some things may be different.
- Young children live in the now. Expect that they may become overly excited and then overly disappointed. They may act out and have temper tantrums. Give them time to adjust.
- Remind children that the returning parent may need alone time to deal with being home.

Tips for School-Age and Adolescent Children

- Older children may be confused about what to do once their parent is home. They may have taken on chores and responsibilities that the deployed parent used to do. They may feel their job is done now that their parent is home. Talk to them about what you expect. Try to include them in your decisions.
- Making it through a deployment isn't easy. Take the time to thank your kids for their help during the deployment. Give them a sense of pride in seeing it through.
- Plan time for the service member to spend quality time with each child when they return. Ask the kids if there is anything they would like to do with their parent.



No one knows your children better than you. Problems at school, weight loss, withdrawal, or emotional outbursts could be signs of a serious problem. If you have concerns about their health or well being, seek professional help.

When my Dad
comes home,
he wants to sleep
first and then
play with me.

— Elementary School Student,
Camp Lejeune



How Deployment Affects Families

Deployment can produce deep, emotional reactions. It is important to know that everyone will not respond in the same way. Learn to understand your own feelings and you'll be able to help your children through the process.

The Service Member

This is their job, and they may withdraw a little bit as they focus on preparing for that job. It is normal for them to feel a mix of emotions: from excitement, to guilt, to uncertainty. Their family is their connection to the real world, and they may not want, or be able, to share details about their job.

It's hard to take care
of your family if you
don't take care
of yourself.

The Homefront

It's tough without your spouse. The service member has been trained for deployment and you haven't. There are no rules or instructions for keeping the house together and supporting the kids on your own. Feeling isolated, abandoned, and lonely can seem hard to overcome.

Where to Get Help

While much of the load will fall on your shoulders, it is important to know **you are not alone**.

- Ask for support from family and friends.
- It's important to tell your child's school about your situation. Write a note to your child's teacher and send it to school. Teachers can help kids while they are at school, and they'll be able to let you know if there are any problems.
- Make a plan for emergencies. Decide who will pick up the kids from school, who can take care of them, and for how long. Share your plan with your children and their school.
- The military has services in place for families. Keep those numbers on hand in case you need them.
- Plan time to take care of yourself. You have stress too! The more help you have, the more time you'll have for yourself.
- Check the Resources Section at the end of this guidebook for more information.

Parents and Reintegration

When the service member returns from deployment, both parents will need time to adjust to having them back home. The spouse at home will have to adjust to not being the sole caregiver anymore. The service member will have to get used to sharing responsibilities again.



The service member will have to get used to being a parent again. They will have to pick up on the changes in the family that took place while they were away: the kids got older and routines are different. The service member may also need time to work through any traumatic events they may have experienced during their deployment. There will be ups and downs. **Be patient and take it one day at a time.**

Conclusion

This guidebook is designed as a starting point to discover ways for your family to cope during this challenging time. As you go through the stages of deployment, you will learn the best ways to use the tips and suggestions in this guidebook to help your family. But if you feel that you or a loved one are still having trouble coping, it may be time to seek help. A licensed mental health professional can give the guidance and support you or your loved one needs to deal with the difficult emotions and stress brought on during this time.

More Resources

The Comfort Crew for Military Kids

<http://www.ComfortCrew.org/Programs.aspx>

Please visit our website to learn more about our programs that comfort and support military kids.

Big Brothers, Big Sisters

www.bbbs.org

Provides children facing adversity with strong and enduring, professionally supported one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better, forever.

National Military Family Association

<http://www.militaryfamily.org/>

Not only do we support military families — we are military families.

Military OneSource

www.militaryonesource.com

Available by phone or online, their free service is provided by the Department of Defense for active-duty, Guard, and Reserve service members and their families.

Our Military Kids

<http://www.ourmilitarykids.org/>

Provides tangible support to children of deployed National Guard and Reserve personnel as well as to children of severely injured service members through grants for enrichment activities and tutoring.

Operation Military Kids

<http://www.operationmilitarykids.org/public/home.aspx>

Regardless of whether Families are experiencing deployment for the first time, or another in a series of multiple deployments, OMK's goal is to connect military children and youth with local resources in order to achieve a sense of community support and enhance their well-being.

United Through Reading

<http://www.unitedthroughreading.org/military/>

The United Through Reading® Military Program helps ease the stress of separation for military families by having deployed parents read children's books aloud via DVD for their child to watch at home.

USO

www.uso.org

The USO lifts the spirits of America's troops and their families.

With You All the Way!

DEALING WITH DEPLOYMENT

With You All the Way: This guidebook is meant to help military families understand the challenges children face during deployment. The tips and techniques in this guidebook are a good first step towards easing the stress and anxiety kids can go through during this emotional time. Working together, you can not only meet these challenges, but also grow stronger as a family.

The Comfort Crew for Military Kids supports and comforts military children through resources, programs and advocacy that strengthen social and emotional resilience. We Are With You All the Way!

