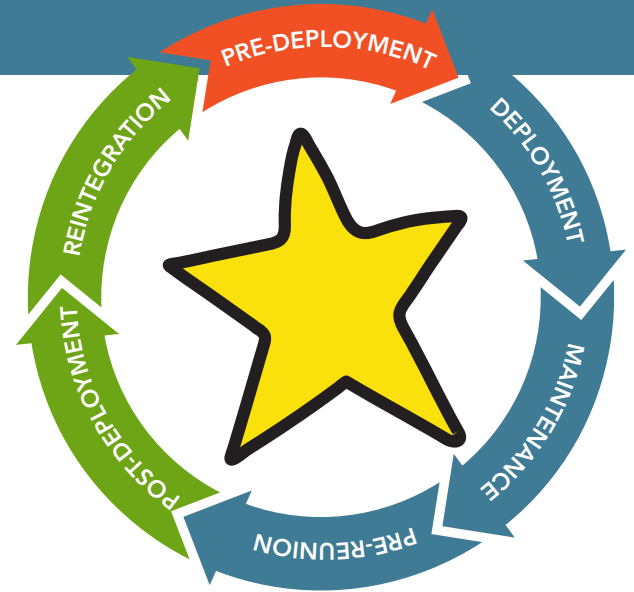


Helping Children Cope with the Cycle of Deployment

Deployment is a challenging time for military families and can create many strong emotions in children. Individual reactions to this stressor may be different, even within the same family. Understanding and preparing for events and emotions in the deployment cycle can help the family cope with this uncertain time. There are specific phases of the deployment process and reactions that are common in each stage.



POSSIBLE REACTIONS IN CHILDREN & TEENS

Pre-Deployment	From the moment of notification until deployment, families may experience denial, anger, irritability, resentment, isolation (physical and emotional), sadness and anxiety.
Deployment	Once the service member is deployed, children may feel loss, grief, guilt, fear and concern for the other parent's well-being. They may also feel sad, angry, frustrated, resentful and overwhelmed by new roles or responsibilities in the household.
Maintenance	As the deployment continues, eventually nearing its end, there are increased feelings of acceptance, adapting to the new routine/role and hopefulness.
Pre-Reunion	As the soldier's deployment nears an end, there will likely be feelings of happiness, anticipation and excitement. There may also be apprehension or anxiety about a potential change to the family routine, happiness, anticipation, and excitement.
Post-Deployment and Reintegration	Upon the parent's return, children may feel relief, happiness, role confusion, apathy, frustration, avoidance or anxiety due to potential parental conflict while adjusting to new routine and roles, followed by acceptance and eventually, stability.

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Promoting Strength During the Cycle of Deployment

Military children depend on their parents' strength and resilience during times of uncertainty. Parenting practices that focus on routines, goals and solutions provide them with a sense of hopefulness and safety. Review these tips to help your family cope with the deployment cycle.

PRE-DEPLOYMENT

Communicate

Support your children's coping by having open communication when notification of deployment arrives. Depending on their developmental level, kids may not understand what a deployment is or why their parent is leaving home for so long. To reduce their confusion and anxiety:



- ◆ Set up a family meeting to explain how the deployment will affect each family member. Listen to their concerns and answer questions they may have.
- ◆ Try to answer any questions truthfully while also maintaining security, positivity, and age-appropriate information.
- ◆ Review possible changes to their routines and the expectation that they follow the rules of the parent at home.
- ◆ Validate their concerns about potential danger and reassure them the parent has trained to do this job safely.

Prepare

Plan for events leading up to and during deployment to make children feel involved and more secure. For example:



- ★ Incorporate children's ideas in planning the new family routine and explain what tasks they might help around the house with.
- ★ Plan ways to stay in touch with the service member (phone calls, texting, video calls, email, letters, care packages). The USPS offers a free [Military Care Kit](#) to send them packages.
- ★ Inform kids that communication may be irregular at times depending on their parent's location.
- ★ Discuss the upcoming deployment with their school/teachers.
- ★ Gather a list of other helpful deployment resources and plan to use them ([Blue Star Families](#), [Military Kids Connect](#), [Military OneSource](#)).
- ★ Schedule a day for children to spend quality time with their deploying parent.
- ★ Allow children to help the service member pack and exchange special keepsakes to give them a sense of control and continued connection.

DEPLOYMENT, MAINTENANCE, & PRE-REUNION



Schedule

When a parent is deployed, military families can benefit from maintaining **routines, rules, and rituals** in the home. It is also important to add new opportunities for socialization and creativity into the schedule.

Doing this can increase the family's sense of positivity, connectedness, and consistency during times of stress. Consider these tips:

- ▲ Make the routine predictable week-to-week (use our **Weekly Routine Planner**).
- ▲ When reinforcing rules or limits, keep the directions and expectations clear.
- ▲ Keep old family rituals going to reassure the children and deployed parent some aspects of family life will stay the same.
- ▲ Sign them up for opportunities to learn new things like a sport, club or other extracurricular activity. Keeping busy with interesting and fun tasks can help time pass and improve mood.
- ▲ Set up time for them to connect with their friends, family, and peers in the same installation.
- ▲ Schedule time to get creative by making cards, care packages, or art for the service member.
- ▲ Create a calendar, or other visual, to countdown to the end of deployment. This helps children visualize the timeline in a concrete way. The countdown also gives them something to look forward to and feel hopeful about. Use our **Deployment Countdown Calendar**, along with stickers or a marker to check-off each day. When introducing the countdown to your children, be sure to remind them that the calendar's length may change due to a potential deployment extension. Also, do not post details of the countdown to social media in order to maintain operational security (OPSEC).

Encourage

Deployment can create many emotional challenges for military children. They may feel sad, scared, angry, or abandoned during this time. It is important to encourage regular communication in

order to understand and respond to your child's emotional distress. Use our **Conversation Starters** to create an open dialogue about their feelings and remind them they are not alone.

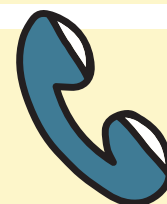


Self-Care

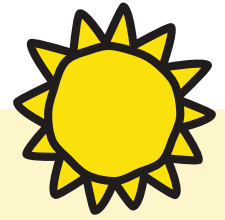
To care for your kids effectively, you must first take care of yourself. If you're used to putting other people's needs ahead of your own, you may feel too guilty to care for yourself — but

it's especially necessary during stressful times like a deployment. Try to find as many ways as possible to lower your stress levels before reaching the point of feeling burned out. Eat healthy foods and get enough physical activity and sleep. Adjust your mindset, schedule breaks into your day and make time for activities that you find enjoyable. Here are some ideas:

- Call someone who can make you laugh and remind you that you're supported.
- Take a walk — the physical activity and sunshine may lift your spirits.
- Read a book, work on a hobby, take a long shower or do something else for 15 or 20 minutes that's solely for your own enjoyment.
- Use stress-reduction techniques to relax (guided meditation/imagery, deep-breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and progressive muscle relaxation).



POST-DEPLOYMENT & REINTEGRATION



Adjust Slowly

When a parent returns from deployment, children can experience a range of emotions and feel overwhelmed. It is important to avoid rushing into

new routines or making big decisions during this phase. Instead, make small, gradual changes to the household routine to incorporate the service member. To help children's adjustment try these tips:

- ▲ Set aside time as a family to talk about the deployment and answer questions the children might have.
- ▲ Discuss any major changes that happened during deployment and show interest in the children's account of events.
- ▲ Explain that while their parent is home now, it will take time for them to adjust and feel settled.
- ▲ Prepare children for potential differences in the service member's daily routine, sleeping patterns, and tolerance for loud noise (dependent on the nature/location of their deployment).
- ▲ Include children in future discussions of any new routine, responsibilities, or roles.
- ▲ If a teen had additional responsibilities during deployment, ask about their preferences and give options to maintain some of that independence.

Reconnect

As children adjust to the service member being back home, encourage them to become more involved in the child's everyday activities. This can create a stronger

emotional bond, promote a sense of family unity, stability, and improve the child's understanding of any re-defined parental roles. Look for daily opportunities for them to connect, such as taking the kids to school, cooking a meal together, reading a story, or simply having a conversation about their day. Getting involved and showing interest can strengthen the quality of the parent-child relationship post-deployment.



If you or a child are in need of support, call our 24/7 Kids & Teens Helpline at **904.202.7900** or text **LIFE** to **741741**. You can also contact Military OneSource at **800.342.9647** for free, confidential, non-medical counseling to help your family with military life stressors. If there is an immediate safety concern, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

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