Young Heroes: Preparing Military Kids for a Parent’s Deployment

Ian Shaffer, MD

This is the first of a three-part series from Health Net, Inc. regarding deployment, its effects on children, and some of the steps that parents can take to ease its impact. The series will cover behaviors and suggested responses during the times of pre-deployment, active duty, and the parent’s return home.

"I'm scared that since he flies a Blackhawk, he may get crashed somewhere," says a little girl about her dad, her dark eyes darting from side to side. Another child -- a blond-haired boy -- buries his face in his small hands. "I just want his entire body home."

These campers attend Operation Purple® Summer Camp Program, a free program run by the National Military Family Association for children with deployed parents. Over 150,000 U.S. children have a parent serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. "The strain on children and parents who are dealing with deployments is tremendous," says Shannon Hillier, manager of Child and Youth Services for the Government Services division of MHN, a subsidiary of Health Net, Inc., and a behavioral health company that supports servicemembers and their families.

Effectively preparing your child for deployment and providing extra support and attention if there are special needs, can greatly reduce the toll on your child – and you. In this article, the first of a three-part series on parenting and deployment, learn how to break the difficult news about deployment to your child, and what you can do to make the transition easier.

Breaking the News

The following tips make it easier for a child to cope with news of an upcoming deployment. You know your child best; depending on your child’s special needs, tips for kids younger than your child may be more appropriate.

Preschoolers

• Tell your preschooler about an upcoming deployment one or two weeks in advance.
• Reassure your preschooler that the deploying parent is leaving due to the job – not because of anything the child has done. (Preschoolers are prone to egocentric thinking and often attribute what happens to themselves.)
• At this age, the concept of a long separation is easier to grasp when it’s explained in simple terms, such as, “Mommy won’t be home until after Christmas.” By giving a timeframe, the child isn’t left guessing as to when one or both parents will return home.

Elementary School Children and Teens

• For kids ages six to eight, you will want to give up to three weeks of notice about a deployment. For ages nine and above, more notice is helpful.
• Older kids may react to news of a parent’s deployment with a greater sense of fear and worry. They may use the Internet or other tools to communicate with their peers and find out information. Ask them about what they have heard or read and gently correct any misperceptions. Remind them that servicemembers are trained to do their jobs and take great measures to ensure safety.

**What to Expect**

You told your three-year old about your spouse’s deployment two weeks ago. Since then, your child has been crying more than usual. Is this behavior normal?

*Preschoolers*

Confusion, surprise, sadness and guilt are common reactions to learning about a parent’s deployment for this age group. Your child may become clingy and seek more attention (both positive and negative) from you and your spouse. Your preschooler may also engage in “magical thinking,” the idea that by praying or wishing hard enough, the child can make something happen. Watch for any indication that your child is trying extra hard to behave in hopes that you or your spouse won’t leave. Remember to reinforce that the child is not responsible for the parent leaving; it is because of the parent’s job.

*Elementary School Children*

Kids in this age group may feel sadness, loneliness, separation anxiety and guilt (from feeling they caused their parent’s departure). Your child may also find it difficult to sleep, concentrate or accept the reality of the situation. You may notice regressive behaviors (such as bedwetting, tantrums, etc.), and angry outbursts alternating with clinging, whining and other behavior problems. Some kids may complain of stomach pains and headaches.

*Teens*

After learning of an upcoming deployment, teens may feel sad or angry. They may also have problems sleeping, miss curfew, curse or avoid the deploying parent. Being peer-focused, teens may want to spend time with friends to distract them from the situation. As a result, they may act aloof or even argue.

*Children with Special Needs*

For kids with certain developmental issues, reactions may be more intense. Don’t hesitate to discuss these reactions with your child’s doctor.

**Helping Children Cope**
There are several things parents can do for kids of all ages and abilities to prepare them for an impending deployment. For example, maintaining a routine is critical for kids during a period of flux – especially for those with special needs. Parents can also alert teachers and other care providers to the situation and ask them to watch for any changes in behavior. Further, parents can let their children know when the deploying parent plans to be home, instead of guaranteeing a return. This allows the child to focus on the future.

The following tips may also help:

**Preschoolers**

- Encourage your child to ask questions, but give simple answers. For example, you can simply tell your child, “I will be home after your birthday,” or “I will be home after Christmas.” Children will ask questions they are ready to deal with. Avoid volunteering information or going into great detail. When responding to a question, tailor the answer to the child’s age and developmental level.
- Be mindful of leaving the television on or having newspapers open to images that may increase your child's anxiety.
- Be consistent about school and childcare pick-up and drop-off times, as well as the time the family spends together.
- Avoid adult conversations about the war and disagreement around your child, which can cause worry if overheard.
- Should you choose to bring your preschooler to the deployment site, you can contact your Family Readiness Group (www.armyrmg.org/skins/frg/home.aspx) beforehand to see if there will be any child activities there. If not, a grandparent or other family member may be available to keep your child company.

**Elementary School Children and Teens**

- Younger children and children with special needs may need more concrete ways to measure time and understand an anticipated return date. One way to do this is to create a paper chain, with each link representing a day, and have the child remove a link as time passes. Another way is to fill a jar with jellybeans (the jellybeans represent the number of days left until a parent is expected home).
- Monitor your child for excessive fascination with media coverage and overexposure to the war.
- Younger children learn and process experiences through play. You can avoid last-minute surprises near the time of deployment by showing your child via re-enactment what will happen at the deployment site.
- If you decide to bring your elementary school-age child to the deployment site, bring things to keep the child occupied. Older children often do well at deployment send-offs.
- Help your child make a gift for the deploying parent, such as a painting. If your child is physically disabled, consider making an audiotape or videotape greeting together.
• For older children, encourage volunteerism at soup kitchens, nursing homes, etc.
• Let teens know that they aren’t expected to fill the role of the deployed parent
  – either in terms of running the household or supporting the at-home parent emotionally.

Being a military child isn’t easy, but preparation for an upcoming deployment can better help your child meet the challenges ahead. Next month, learn how to help your child cope after a parent leaves for active duty service.

**Sources**

Bilyana, Atova. 2007. Communication is Key When Children Face Parent's Deployment. 


Military Child Education Coalition. How to prepare our children and stay involved in their education during deployment. 

Military Homefront. Families in Transition. 
http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/portal/page/mhf/MHF/MHF_DETAIL_1?section_id=20.40.500.570.0.0.0.0.0.0&content_id=218947 (accessed May 14, 2008).


Pincus, Simon et al. The Emotional Cycle of Deployment. 

