CHAPTER 4

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR DEPLOYMENT

Preparing for Deployment

There are positive aspects of separation, in that it can be growth inducing and foster maturity and independence. It can also prepare children for the separations and changes they will ultimately face in lifetime. However, the period before Dad or Mum goes away can be a difficult one for some families.

This is especially so if the parent is deploying for the first time and/or if the children are young. Such reactions are entire normal, but none the less stressful on all concerned and sometimes quite difficult to manage. Here are some practical ideas on what can be done in the pre-deployment period.

Children, especially young ones, often indicate their feelings through their behaviour rather than words. If you notice a change in your child’s behaviour or think something may be wrong and so you ask if something is bothering them, a child will often say “no”. But there are ways to get through. Make some casual reference to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending deployment. Sometimes that enables a parent and child to share similar feelings. It also helps a child to realise their parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh and it models an appropriate way to release feelings - talking about them.

Effects On Children

Children have feelings too. For the parent who is departing it is important to keep the lines of communication open to your children. Talk honestly with them and try to understand how they are feeling about you leaving them for such a long time. Constant reassurance that you will be coming home is vital. Be careful not to shrug off their fears as being “silly”. Children do worry, and it is quite a normal reaction for them to be upset about your decision to leave.

Talk to your Children About the Deployment Before It Happens

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give a child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and may worry more when they are left in the dark. Knowing about the deployment in advance helps in adjusting to the idea.

Plan For Communicating

Expect children to stay in touch with their parent. A lively discussion needs to take place before deployment. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing, such as cassette tape exchanges, photographs with their parent while they are deployed, encoded messages, “puzzle messages” (a written letter cut into puzzle parts that must be assembled in order to read), unusual paper for stationery and pictures drawn by pre-schoolers. Perhaps envelopes already addressed by Dad or Mum (to themselves) in the parent’s own writing could be used as “special” message envelopes for a child.
Build an Emotional Bond

The deploying parent needs to spend quality time with each child before he/she leaves. Time that is special and just for them. Don’t be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is powerful communication. Older children (8 and over) appreciate being consulted when deciding how long and where this “special” time together can occur.

As well as showing particular interest in their school work, hobbies, sports etc, use this time to share pride in your work, the unit or group and the purpose for your deployment.

Children of school age are beginning to understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It’s a little easier to let go if Dad’s or Mum’s job is seen as essential to the mission of the country and the Defence Force.

Visit Your Child’s Teacher

Frequently children react to the deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their school work. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging.

Help Children to Plan for The Departure

While the parent is packing bags, allow your child to assist in some way; rolling socks in balls or folding a handkerchief or Tee-shirt. Suggest a “swap of some small token, something of your child’s that can be easily packed into the bag in return for something of the parent’s” (a key ring, old hat or cap, ribbons or other uniform devices).

Discuss the household chores and let your child choose (as much as possible) the ones they’d rather do. Mother and father need to agree with each other that the division of household chores is reasonable. Mother’s or father’s role as disciplinarian needs to be supported and demonstrated by the other parent.

Have a family photo taken of everyone together. Take a snapshot picture book of the posted parent doing everyday things with the children, like giving a booth, reading a book, playing ball etc. A book for each child is best.

The pre-deployment period is stressful for parents and children. Confronted with an extended absence of a parent, family members may sense a loss of continuity and security. Children may not fully understand why one of their parents must leave. Very young children may become confused and fearful that the remaining parent will also desert them.

As already stated, children are not very good at expressing fears and feelings in words. They often act out their feelings through their behaviour (usually without any conscious motivation). Anger, a desire for revenge and guilt for feeling that way is often demonstrated in the child’s behaviour. Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. When change occurs, children often have no other way to release anxieties and nowhere to go for help. At a time when the parent’s responsibility to his/her work becomes most demanding of their time and energy, the parent who is left behind feels overwhelmed, anticipating months alone with sole responsibility for their children, home and car.
DEPLOYMENT

She (my wife Claire) tells my son, James who is two, everything. He seems to have coped quite well. He went out with dirty shoes the other day and Claire told him off. He looked up at her and said, “It doesn’t matter Mummy, Daddy’s not here to mind.” He hasn’t forgotten me.

Captain John Walters, RAAC,
Gulf War veteran (attached to the Grenadier Guards)

Children

During the separation children need added support and attention. Perhaps the most important step to minimise adverse effects on children is to keep the absent parent part of the family’s emotional life. Don’t be scared to talk about separation or the missing parent with the kids, it can sometimes make the separation more keenly felt, but it tends to make the reunion stage go much more smoothly.

After the Parent Has Left On Deployment

The parent should plan to communicate with each child individually. There is no substitute for a letter with your own name on the envelope. Send postcard, snapshots and maybe tape recordings of the sounds around you. Use unusual stamps, felt-tipped pens, coloured pencils and different styles of lettering for variety and interest.

Problem Behaviours

Children may experience a sense of insecurity during a parent’s long absence. Their world “normally” comprises a mother, a father and a home, which creates a strong basis for security. Remove one, and the children have lost a part of their security. The effect of this can show up in many ways, often in varying degrees of unacceptable behaviour. For example, toddlers may throw tantrums, young children may have a recurrence of bed-wetting, and older children may have a drop in school results. Sometimes it is not realised that these symptoms are related to a parent’s absence.

Younger children often ask very sensitive questions about death: “Will Daddy kill people?” These questions can sometimes touch an emotional nerve in the remaining parent. Try to deal with such issues calmly. The way you deal with such issues relating to the separation may determine how well your child copes.

Fighting among siblings may increase as older children take advantage of Dad’s absence or simply take out their frustrations on their younger siblings. Older boys may become over-protective of Mum and become proper nuisances! Some adolescents may become involved with the “wrong crowd,” others may openly show anger or sadness, while others may deny any emotional reaction and become very aloof from the remaining parent. All these reactions are signs that the child is finding the separation difficult to cope with. You may find it to be more productive to discuss their feelings about the separation rather than focussing on the problem behaviours themselves.
Promote Involvement

By actively (but indirectly) involving your children in the deployment you may help overcome their fears and upsets. Begin by putting a map of the area(s) you are going to on a wall at home. School projects have often been started whilst a parent is overseas. These may involve marking your travels on a classroom map and using your letters, photographs, video footage, scrounged tourist brochures and/or local newspaper and books to work on a project on the country. School projects can benefit the class, and more importantly, your child feels involved and very proud.

**Hang a map** on the refrigerator or on the wall of where the parent is going. Use map pins or marking pens to identify the country and where the parent will be located.

**Let the children tape messages** on their own cassettes or send on from the whole family. Cassette tapes are like conversations and are important to our kids. The need to hear their parent’s voice as well as receive letters. Encourage the children to record cassette messages to their posted parent. This is especially nice for tots who are learning to talk, and it keeps the posted parent in touch with their progress. In turn the parent can read a favourite story-book as well as “visit” with each child on a tape cassette.

**Each child should be encouraged** to write individual letters to the deployed parent who should answer these letters individually. The member will thrill his/her child if postcards are posted especially for the child.

**Send photos and letters about activities.** Keep the deployed parent informed on family events such as ball game schedules, class plays etc. In return the posted parent can write about the daily routine, what an evening meal is like, who sits where, how and what is served, and what a work day is like. Children can send school work and class newspapers, but it’s probably not a good idea to send report cards, perhaps a copy would be better.

**Presents are important** but they don’t have to be expensive. The deployed parent can buy or plan presents for birthdays and holidays in advance, attach special messages and leave them at home. Kids love getting gifts through the mail from another country, particularly if they include something you might not find here. For example, T-shirts, postcards, coins, or dolls are items they can share at school with their friends and teachers.

**Home “Communication Centre”**. Set up your refrigerator as your “Communication Centre”. Have the family, put up pictures of all the family members. Put up a calendar and mark off the days/months of the posting. Attach an envelope where the children and you can put pieces of information, notes, or papers you’ll want to share later. Add seasonal decorations and shift things around from week to week to keep the Communication Centre interesting.

**During the Deployment.** The family at home needs to work on talking about their deployed members. Talk about fun things you’ve done in the past and what the parent might be doing. Talk about and make lists of changes that have happened while they’ve been gone. Sometimes you or a child may feel sad and not want to talk about the deployed family member and that’s OK. However, you should address their feelings and perhaps also share them upon reunion.
RETURNING TO YOUR FAMILY

The Children

Is this my child? Children can change very quickly in the space of six months, and not just toddlers! A girlish daughter may blossom into a young woman, and a teenage son into a man. These are initially eye-opening developments but are usually quickly absorbed. It is not unusual for a returning parent to fail to recognise a child. Six months of growth, a haircut and/or new clothes can be deceiving! Bewildered looks can occur in both parties at the same time, especially from younger children.

Sudden changes. Some children who have been apparently well - adjusted throughout the parent’s absence, will suddenly reveal problem behaviours on the parent’s return. They may not let the father return emotionally into their lives but will keep him at a distance. This is the child’s way of trying to deal with the possibility that the parent will go away again. In such a situation be patient and try to involve yourself in the child’s day-to-day activities as often as you can.

Attention seeking. Most young children will go through an attention-seeking phase. Such behaviours can be positive (for example, doing a special drawing for you), or negative (for example breaking objects), or often a mixture of both. Try to encourage the positive by rewarding the child. Simply speaking to them often enough through cuddles and sharing time are perhaps the best rewards. It is important to try and simply to ignore the negative as much as possible.

Jealousy. All the children will have formed closer bonds with the parent who remained at home. They may be protective of them, very clingy, and very jealous. An older boy may feel resentment when his role as “man of the house” has been taken from him upon Dad’s return. Other potential traps that may amplify negative feelings at the homecoming are allowing younger children to sleep in bed with Mum while Dad is away and permitting major differences in discipline between when Dad is home and when he is away.

Possessiveness. On the other hand, some young children may become extremely possessive of the returning parent. They may refuse to go to sleep unless Mum is in the bedroom, they may cling physically to Dad’s leg or demand to be carried everywhere with him. They may cry when Mum puts on her uniform to go to work for the day or ask repeated questions about how long she will be at work. This stage can be frustrating but patience is required in order for the child to eventually feel secure about your return. Brief telephone calls in the first days back at work may help to reassure that Dad will be home soon.

Favouritism. Though they will rarely admit it, most parents with more than one child have a “favourite.” Be aware that the homecoming is a time when children are sensitive to favouritism. The gifts you have brought home, the praises you bestow, even the order and length of greeting hugs may cause hurt or resentment in a touchy or perceptive child. Be aware of this possible issue and take steps to prevent any such problems.
Discipline. School-age children may initially be happy and loving towards the returning parent, but this may change if their routine is disrupted too quickly and/or harshly. They may hear arguments between Mum and Dad and put blame on the one who has been away. You may hear mumbled comments such as “It was better when Dad wasn’t here”. Take any such statements as signs that you may need to have an open and honest chat and slow down the changes to recent routine. Parents may need to discuss discipline with each other and perhaps with the children.

“We always have problems with the boys when he’s (husband Phil) at sea. I say what they can and can’t do, if they want to go to a party or a disco or stay with a friend. I’m the person they have to negotiate with... But when Phil comes home he thinks he should be the one to decide - and the trouble is, he’s out of touch. He doesn’t realise how fast the boys grow up - even six months can make a big difference with an adolescent. He doesn’t credit them with any sense, and that’s particularly hard to swallow for the eldest, because in a way, he’s the ‘man of the family’ when his Dad’s not around... I can guarantee that within a week of Phil coming home there’ll be an almighty bust-up between him and the boys - with me in the middle. If it didn’t happen so regularly I’d think the world was coming to an end, but as it is, I know its an ‘Event’ and we just have to go through it.”

Navy Lieutenant’s wife. Military Man, Family Man

NOT ALL PEACHES AND CREAM.

Most children have a mixture of positive and negative feelings toward a returning parent. Beneath the happy hugs and squeals of joy there are other feelings of hurt, anger, resentment, insecurity, jealousy, and perhaps hostility and fear. Some children’s reactions can be emotionally devastating to the returning parent. Babies will probably not know you and may cry when held. Toddlers and pre-schoolers may not seem to know you and may even appear fearful of you, flinching away from a homecoming kiss. Not only may they try to avoid you or hide from you, they may try to stop you going near their mother. Tantrums and continuous crying may be common in these younger children.

Teenage children may seem distant and appear not to care about your return. Unless you expect and try to understand such reactions, you can be heart-broken.

“When my husband came back... he had a difficult time adjusting to our daughter and realising that she was a person and part of our family. She was 15 months old when we started living together again, and it had become clear to me how much of her early development he had missed, and the effect that it had on him. When my son was a little baby he was extremely interested in every phase of his development. Of course he has missed all that with her. She was at the stage of trying desperately to get her spoon from the cereal dish to her mouth and landing it on her ear. To me this was progress... but he got very impatient with her over little things like that, and I realised how much he had missed”.

Barbara, Home Front
DEPLOYMENT CHECKLIST FOR KIDS

Before your Parent Goes on Deployment

___ Let your parent know you love him/her.
___ Talk to your parent about how you feel about their leaving.
___ Ask your parent to tell you about their job.
___ Make a "date" to spend time alone with your parent. Do something special – just the two of you.
___ Have a picture taken of you and your parent. Keep one copy and send one with you deploying parent.
___ Make or buy something special that your parent can take on the deployment.
___ Talk to your parents about rules, responsibilities, chores, and allowances. Make sure everyone understands what is expected during the deployment.
___ Plan ways to celebrate special occasions even though you're apart.

It will be hard to say good bye to your dad or mom when they deploy. Kids need to be deployment ready – just like mum and dad. To get ready and make it easier to be apart, try the following ideas.

Staying in Touch

Make sure you stay in touch. This takes planning in advance. Talk to your parent about writing letters, talking on the phone, and sending e-mails. Try some of the following ideas.

___ Keep a list of what you want to ask or tell them so you will remember when you write or talk to them.
___ Buy copies of the same book. Read chapters and both of you can share your thoughts and ideas.
___ Keep them up to date on what’s going on with you – school, sports, etc.
___ Send drawings or photographs.
___ Burn a copy of your favourite CD and send it.
___ Send your school work.
___ Bake cookies and mail a batch to your mum or dad.
___ Make an audio or video tape.
___ Cut out articles or comics from the newspaper that you know they’d like.
___ Write a review of a movie you saw.
___ Send them sports scores.
___ Keep a journal or scrapbook to share when your parent returns.

It’s ok to feel sad or mad sometimes. It’s not easy to have your parent faraway. But, if you are feeling bad a lot or are taking it out on others, talk to your parent, teacher, coach or other adult friend about your feelings. They can help!

Remember your mom or dad is still your parent even though they’re deployed. They love you and care about you.
CHILDREN AND DEPLOYMENTS

Strengths of Defence Children
- Fosters maturity
- Encourages growth
- Encourages independence
- Encourages flexibility
- Builds skills for adjusting to separation and losses in later life
- Strengthens family bonds

Issues for Deploying Parent
- Worries about losing touch with the children
- Concerns about being forgotten
- Worries about changes that will occur
- Concerns about how to be a good parent while deployed

Issues for Non-Deploying Parent
- Concerns about heavier workload and increased responsibility
- Worries about their ability to maintain discipline practices
- Concerns about being both "Mum" and "Dad"
- Concerns for safety of deployed partner

Issues for Children
- Why must my parent go away?
- Separation anxiety
- Feelings of sadness and loss
- When is my parent returning?
- Feelings of low self esteem

Expressions of Feelings
- May be reflected in anger, hostility, a desire for revenge, or a desire to be punished for having such feelings
- May feel unlovable or worthless
- Children also mirror feelings of the non-deploying parent and care givers eg. If you are anxious and unsettled they will be too - SO TRY TO STAY POSITIVE!

Signs of Separation Anxiety
- A young child may cling to people or favourite toy, blanket, etc.
- Regressing in behaviour such as toileting accidents, thumb-sucking, etc
- Unexplained crying or tearfulness
- Any changes in a child's behaviour ie withdrawal
- Change in relationship with same-age friends
- Increased acts of aggression toward people or things
- Choosing adults over same-age friends
- Shying away from people or things
- Sleep difficulties
- Eating difficulties
- Fear of new people or situations

Ways to Help Children Cope
- Set a GREAT example by being positive
- Talk to teachers, child care workers
- Have photos of the serving member or family photos
- Talk to the children about the situation regularly and try to answer their questions
- Ask deploying parent to leave some old uniform items for dress-up play
- Track the deployment on a world map
- Have a calendar marking important dates – date of deployment, return, etc.
- Let them plan some activities to do before the parent leaves, while they are away and when the parent returns
- If possible, communicate regularly by letter, cards, email and phone
- If possible, organise a special parcel to send to the deployed parent and include child’s artwork etc.
- Consider limiting the amount of media exposure your children get (as it may distress, confuse and worry them)
- Try to keep normal routines as children need stability
- Give them chores to do when their parent is away to encourage responsibility
The Deployment Roller Coaster: Emotions of Children

By Kelli Kirwan

Deployment is something that military families live with. It’s part of your life if your spouse is a member of the Defence Force. Adults experience a whole spectrum of emotions, but we can usually discuss our feelings about the deployment and find understanding among our peers. We can learn about the roller coaster of emotion that comes along with a deployment. Once we understand our emotions, we can begin to adjust and prepare to combat the more difficult times. Children, however, don’t always understand that roller-coaster ride. Without their permission or consent, they are loaded into the front seat of the emotional roller coaster and taken through the loops and turns of deployment.

There are seven emotional stages that adults typically experience during a deployment. It’s harder to put a label on what children go through. We can’t always tell how they’re feeling, and they can’t always tell us what they’re thinking, or what they might be afraid of. We can help children prepare for the deployment, but in the end, we must often live in the moment with them. If one thing is predictable when it comes to children and deployment, it is that children and deployment are highly unpredictable.

Stop, Look, and Listen
Active listening is important no matter what your child’s age. Often you must listen "between the lines" as your children are talking. Helping them express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns throughout the entire deployment process is healthy. Acknowledging their feelings and then reassuring them that both their parents love them can bring them comfort.

A younger child who can’t talk yet or is unable to put his thoughts and fears into words will instead give you clues by his behaviour. You can read your child better than anyone, so it’s up to you to start the conversations and give the attention and affection that will reassure your child.

Before Your Partner Leaves
Even before a military parent leaves, some children start to behave differently—some children act out, while others withdraw. They may become anxious at the thought of their parent leaving, and develop unfounded fears. Older children who can understand more of the current events that affect our military (and, by default, them) may develop fears that are not unfounded, and cannot easily be put to rest.

Children have an uncanny habit of asking profound questions that have no easy answers. Questions dealing with life, death, and a hundred "what ifs" in between can really test your parenting skills, but take the time to answer them truthfully and matter-of-factly. When answering, consider your child’s age, emotional maturity, and ability to process tough issues. Give enough information to satisfy their questions, but be careful not to bring up additional issues or subjects they may not be ready to know.

As the deployment draws near and the day of departure approaches, some children will become more sensitive and need to be close to their parents, so be patient if they seem needy or clingy. Others may withdraw, become quiet, and separate themselves, so be ready to spend extra quiet time alone with them if they don’t want to join the family group.

In one family’s experience with a deployment, some of the children expressed love and concern for the departing parent, while their 5-year-old sister acted as if the parent was merely going to the shop for milk. The next morning, when still half asleep, the little girl asked for her daddy. Her mother explained that Daddy had left the day before.
The little girl sleepily said she missed her daddy and didn't want him to leave. The mother took the opportunity to tell her daughter that she missed Daddy too (validating the little girl's feelings), and that he would be home when they got to the big heart circled on the calendar (reassuring that all would be well). The child's detachment had only been a coping mechanism to help her deal with what she could not comprehend—her home without her daddy for six months.

**In the Beginning**
As the deployment begins, the whole family works to establish the new routine. Children may test the parent left behind to find out what they can get away with. Everyone is readjusting to help fill the empty space left by their Sailor, soldier or airman or woman. It's important to establish structure and routine as soon as possible. Don't be surprised if some of the kids become melancholy, and their grades begin to slip. Other children may display defiance and belligerence. Younger children may regress back to bedwetting or "accidents." Clearly defined limits will give children a feeling of security at a time when they may feel the most insecure but can't express it in words.

**During the Deployment**
Life will settle down into some semblance of routine and normalcy. Don't get too comfortable, though. Someone forgot to tell the children that this is the time to stabilise and hit their stride. Most of the time things do settle down, but keep watching for signs of distress in their behaviour and attitude. If you feel your children are having more difficulty adjusting than you think is normal, consult a counsellor or social worker.

**Your Partner Is Coming Home**
As homecoming approaches, don't be tempted to let things slide. The reunion can be as unsettling for children as the departure. Don't worry that all the projects were not accomplished or that you didn't meet the goals you may have set. Your children will take their cue from you. Happy anticipation is better than stressful worry about the fast-approaching reunion.

**Welcome Back**
If you thought the roller-coaster ride had stopped the day the ship pulled in or plane touched down, then you're in for a surprise. There will be a honeymoon period, but then the reorganising of the family begins. The children may resent being disciplined by their returned parent and react in various ways. They may need time to adjust to having two "big people" to answer to.

Children may have great anxiety when the parent first returns to duty. They need to be reassured that they will see their parent again that evening. Other children may not be able to wait for their dad or mum to go back to work because their routine has been upset once again. Communication helps children deal with their feelings when it comes to deployment and the reunion. Encouraging your children to talk (and really listening to them thoughtfully) will help you help them with those sudden dips and turns.

The parent at home is the emotional rudder that steers the family through the deployment. You have a great effect on how your children handle life as part of a military family and how well they handle deployments. If they know you're there beside them on that roller coaster, they won't be as afraid the next time they have to take that first big hill.
CHILDREN AND DEPLOYMENTS

Strengths of Defence Children
- Fosters maturity
- Encourages growth
- Encourages independence
- Encourages flexibility
- Builds skills for adjusting to separation and losses in later life
- Strengthens family bonds

Issues for Deploying Parent
- Worries about losing touch with the children
- Concerns about being forgotten
- Worries about changes that will occur
- Concerns about how to be a good parent while deployed

Issues for Non-Deploying Parent
- Concerns about heavier workload and increased responsibility
- Worries about their ability to maintain discipline practices
- Concerns about being both "Mum" and "Dad"
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Issues for Children
- Why must my parent go away?
- Separation anxiety
- Feelings of sadness and loss
- When is my parent returning?
- Feelings of low self-esteem

Expressions of Feelings
- May be reflected in anger, hostility, a desire for revenge, or a desire to be punished for having such feelings
- May feel unlovable or worthless
- Children also mirror feelings of the non-deploying parent and care givers eg. If you are anxious and unsettled they will be too - SO TRY TO STAY POSITIVE!

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- Sleep difficulties
- Eating difficulties
- Fear of new people or situations

Ways to Help Children Cope
- Set a GREAT example by being positive
- Talk to teachers, child care workers
- Have photos of the serving member or family photos
- Ask deploying parent to leave some old uniform items for dress-up play
- Track the deployment on a world map
- Have a calendar marking important dates - date of deployment, return, etc.
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- If possible, organise a special parcel to send to the deployed parent and include child’s artwork etc.
- Consider limiting the amount of media exposure your children get (as it may distress, confuse and worry them)
- Try to keep normal routines as children need stability
- Give them chores to do when their parent is away to encourage responsibility
ASSISTING KIDS COPE WITH DEPLOYMENT

Tip Sheet For Parents

Children are unable to articulate their feelings and thoughts as adults do. Instead it will often present in their behaviour. A mild or brief change in any behaviour is not going to give you cause for concern. However, if there is a persistent and obvious change in behaviour (excessive) then seek further advice.

Stress affects children like it does adults. Children may complain of headaches, stomach distress and sleep disturbances. They may display moodiness, irritability, low energy or have more dramatic reactions to minor situations.

Each child and each family is unique and so too are their reactions to situations.

Children are more adaptable and resilient if we give them appropriate information

- When parents first learn about a deployment, they should digest information before they communicate to the child so they can deliver it in a calm and reassuring manner.
- If possible, prepare the children for what is going to happen in advance.
- If deployment will change the child’s lifestyle (moving, living with grandparents, changing childcare/schools or community activities) tell the child in advance.
- Explain to your children that Mum/Dad has to go away for work (explain lengthy of absence in terms of sleeps/special events ie birthdays/Christmas, etc)
- Reinforce Mum/Dad will be coming back
- Don’t lie about where Mum/Dad is – fear of unknown is often scarier!
- If possible tell them what sort of work Mum/Dad will be doing.
- Be realistic but do not scare the child
- Push the peacekeeping or the exercise/practice role – not a fighting one.
- If you have a son, be careful not to say in Dad’s absence he is the ‘man of the house’. This can create power struggles with mother and other children in the house; can create power struggles when the member returns; can confuse roles/boundaries; can place too much perceived responsibility/expectations on the son which can be overwhelming.
- Notify and maintain regular contact with your child’s teacher/child care provider
- Encourage child to maintain contact with the deployed parent via e-mail, phone, letters, parcels, drawings, etc.
- Spend one on one with your child whenever possible.
- Keep a routine, but allow some flexibility. (few more treats/favourite foods/outings)
• Keep usual rules/expectations/discipline
• Be tolerant and understanding of changes to child’s behaviour. However, do not allow them to get away with inappropriate behaviour.
• Don’t threaten your child with what will happen “when Mum/Dad gets home.”
• NEVER say, “if you don’t behave yourself Mum/Dad will never come back.”
• Limit television and other media coverage relating to deployment
• Avoid changing sleeping routine (what time they go to bed, where they sleep, etc)
• SPECIAL EVENTS: Video tape special events (ie Christmas/birthdays/mother’s day, etc). Take photos and send to deployed parent.
• Reassure children of your (and deployed parent’s) love and support

FOR THE DEPLOYED PARENT
• If possible write to your child. If you have more than one child write to each of them. Phone calls are great, but letters are better.
• Try to send photos. (where you eat/sleep/shower, celebrations of any special events, etc)
• If deployed parent knows in advance that they will be away for special events, plan for this. For example, have packages and presents ready for the ‘stay at home’ parent to give to the child.

PARENT SELF CARE

• Be mindful of your own feelings as children will pick up on them and respond to them.
• Be honest and share your feelings. Say why you are quieter/snappier/sadder.
• Find time to rest
• Treat/pamper yourself
• Try to get enough sleep. We are more vulnerable to stress when we are tired.
• Eat well
• Accept help from family/friends/Unit if feeling overwhelmed.
• Seek professional support.

Whilst deployment can present with some challenges, there can be a lot that is gained from the experience.
• Independence and self-confidence grow for all
• Parent/child relationship at home is strengthened
• Deployed parent child/relationship can grow through cards, letters, e-mails, phone calls, packages, etc
• Family relationship is enhanced through planning and flexibility
STRAATEGIES for
HELPING CHILDREN WITH DEPLOYMENT

Deployments are a fact of life for military families. Children will all react to the separation in different ways. The following are some tips to assist parents.

- Remember that you are the “expert” on your child. You know what is normal behavior for her/him and will be the best one to notice when things are out of sync.

- Reassure your children often that they are loved by those at home and by their deployed parent. Give lots of hugs.

- As appropriate, be honest with your children. Trying to hide things from them will only lead them to imagine the situation is much worse than it really is.

- Understand your child’s level of development. Know what is normal behavior for your child’s age. Be aware of changes and seek assistance early.

- Listen to your children and help to clear up any misunderstandings they may have. (Mom/Dad does get to eat and sleep even though their bed/refrigerator is at home!) Be with your child when watching/reading news so you can answer questions. In times of crisis, limit their exposure to media so that it does not increase their anxiety.

- Expect regression, changes, and stress due to separation.

- Talk about your child’s feelings and allow him or her to do the same. Accept those feelings even though they may be very different from your own.

- Encourage your children to talk. Let them share options, suggestions, and solutions for problems. Encourage them to express anger verbally, not physically.

- Provide additional adult relationships for your children, which may include grandparents, neighbors, friends, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, scout leaders, etc.

- Inform your child’s teachers/guidance counselors about the deployment so they are better able to provide assistance to the child if necessary. Ask if there is a deployment support group available in the school. FFSC staff can help start one if requested.

- Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words. Children learn their coping skills from those around them. How well you cope with the deployment will have a significant influence on how your children will react.

- Take care of yourself. You need to eat well, get sufficient rest and exercise, and spend time doing things you enjoy. If you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be able to care for your children.
CHILDREN AND DEPLOYMENTS

Strengths of Defence Children
• Fosters maturity
• Encourages growth
• Encourages independence
• Encourages flexibility
• Builds skills for adjusting to separation and losses in later life
• Strengthens family bonds

Issues for Deploying Parent
• Worries about losing touch with the children
• Concerns about being forgotten
• Worries about changes that will occur
• Concerns about how to be a good parent while deployed

Issues for Non-Deploying Parent
• Concerns about heavier workload and increased responsibility
• Worries about their ability to maintain discipline practices
• Concerns about being both “Mum” and “Dad”
• Concerns for safety of deployed partner

Issues for Children
• Why must my parent go away?
• Separation anxiety
• Feelings of sadness and loss
• When is my parent returning?
• Feelings of low self esteem

Expressions of Feelings
• May be reflected in anger, hostility, a desire for revenge, or a desire to be punished for having such feelings
• May feel unlovable or worthless
• Children also mirror feelings of the non-deploying parent and caregivers eg. If you are anxious and unsettled they will be too - SO TRY TO STAY POSITIVE!

Signs of Separation Anxiety
• A young child may cling to people or favourite toy, blanket, etc.
• Regressing in behaviour such as toileting accidents, thumb-sucking, etc
• Unexplained crying or tearfulness
• Any changes in a child’s behaviour ie withdrawal
• Change in relationship with same-age friends
• Increased acts of aggression toward people or things
• Choosing adults over same-age friends
• Shying away from people or things
• Sleep difficulties
• Eating difficulties
• Fear of new people or situations

Ways to Help Children Cope
• Set a GREAT example by being positive
• Talk to teachers, child care workers
• Have photos of the serving member or family photos
• Talk to the children about the situation regularly and try to answer their questions
• Ask deploying parent to leave some old uniform items for dress-up play
• Track the deployment on a world map
• Have a calendar marking important dates – date of deployment, return, etc.
• Let them plan some activities to do before the parent leaves, while they are away and when the parent returns
• If possible, communicate regularly by letter, cards, email and phone
• If possible, organise a special parcel to send to the deployed parent and include child’s artwork etc.
• Consider limiting the amount of media exposure your children get (as it may distress, confuse and worry them)
• Try to keep normal routines as children need stability
• Give them chores to do when their parent is away to encourage responsibility