

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 88

(Updated March 2004)

FAMILIES IN THE MILITARY

Global conflict and unrest have led to deployment of large numbers of military personnel (active duty, Reserves, National Guard). As a result of duty assignments, members of the military are often separated for lengthy periods of time from their families and sent to distant, dangerous or unknown locations. A family that loses the active presence of a parent through separation faces significant challenges and stress. During the parent's deployment, family members may feel isolated, unsupported and anxious. They may also experience financial stress. Media coverage of events can also increase concern.

Some families must also deal with the trauma of having a parent seriously injured or killed. Families who have little or no contact with extended family and/or the military community may be especially vulnerable to stress. In families with existing medical, emotional or behavioral problems, a parent being away can be especially difficult.

While most families and children manage successfully, it is important for parents to be aware of signs of stress and possibly serious problems. The responses of children to stress of separation are determined by their individual makeup and developmental age. The following are some common reactions:

- Infants (Birth - 12 months) may respond to disruptions in their schedule, physical environment or availability of caregivers with decreased appetite, weight loss, irritability and/or apathy.
- Toddlers (one-three yrs.) may become sullen, tearful, throw temper tantrums or develop sleep problems.
- Preschoolers (three-six yrs.) are more aware of the absence of a parent than younger children and their behavior may regress in areas such as toilet training, sleep, separation fears, physical complaints, or thumb sucking. They may personalize situations and express a fear that, "Daddy left because I was angry at him" or "Mommy stays away because she doesn't love me."
- School age children (6-12 yrs.) are more aware of the realities behind their parent leaving and the potential dangers. They may show irritable behavior, aggression or whininess. They also may become more regressed and fearful that their parent may be injured or die.
- Teenagers (13-18 yrs.) may be rebellious, irritable or more challenging of authority. Parents need to be alert to high-risk behaviors such as problems with the law, sexual acting out, and drug/alcohol abuse.

A parent leaving home on a military assignment increases the burden on all family members. The following suggestions can ease the stress:

Families in the Military, “Facts for Families,” No. 88 (3/04)

- Talk as a family before the reassignment, sharing information, feelings, worries and plans for the future. Let your child know that the family member is making a valuable contribution to their country and the world.
- Emphasize the need for the family to pull together during the parent’s absence with everyone sharing in family responsibilities.
- Continue family traditions, structure and discipline. This is reassuring and stabilizing to children.
- Utilize available means (e.g. letters, email, phone) for the family members to communicate with the deployed parent.
- Share information with children based upon their developmental level and ability to understand. No news is usually more stressful and difficult to deal with than bad news.
- Monitor children’s exposure to TV coverage of war events and political discussions of the war.
- Encourage the open and honest expression of worries, feelings, and questions.
- Consider having children participate in a project associated with their parent’s deployment (e.g. classroom letter writing project, keeping a journal or scrapbook).
- Don’t make promises that you can’t keep.
- Initiate and maintain a close relationship and communication with your child’s teachers and school.
- Utilize extended family, community and spiritual resources and other natural supports that are available both within and outside the military.
- As a single parent at home, make sure that you also take care of yourself so that you can be available to your children.

Although a joyous occasion, when a family member returns home after a long absence, a period of adjustment will be necessary. Roles, responsibilities and routines must be re-established. The emotional readjustment will require time and patience. This can be a difficult time and all family members will need extra support. This is especially true if there has been a serious injury. If a parent or a child develops emotional or behavioral problems or is having serious difficulties with the adjustment, they should be referred for evaluation by a qualified mental health professional.

While it is a difficult time for families, most children can and do adjust successfully to the separation and stress involved when a parent in the military is deployed.

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