

# CHILDREN AND DEPLOYMENT

Parents can help children understand and accept the separation and their feelings about it by planning ahead. Anticipate the problems and discuss them with the entire family.

## PRE-FAMILY SEPARATION

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

Children are not very good at expressing fears and feelings in words. Anger and a desire for revenge, as well as guilt for feeling that way, are often demonstrated in the child's behaviour. Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. When changes occur, children usually have no other way to release anxieties, and no where to go for help. At a time when the separated spouse's responsibility to the Navy/Army/Air Force becomes more demanding of their time and energy, the remaining spouse may feel overwhelmed, as they prepare to solely support the children, home and car.

What can be done about relieving the stress of the pre-family separation period? Think about the following ideas which have been helpful to others in similar situations:

## TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT OR 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 the child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left in the dark. Knowing about the assignment or deployment in advance helps in adjusting to the idea.

## BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL BOND

The departing parent needs to spend some QUALITY time with each child before they leave. Younger children (under 8) will be willing to accept a half hour of face-to-face communication. 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.

Use this time to share pride in your work and the purpose for your assignment or deployment. Children of school age are beginning to understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier to let go if Mum or Dad's job is seen as essential to the mission of the Navy/Army/Air Force.

Often when asked if something is bothering them, a child will say "no." But there are ways to get through. Make some casual reference to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending assignment or deployment. Something that enables parent and child to share similar feelings. It also helps a child to realize their parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it models an appropriate way to release feelings--talk about them.

### **VISIT YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER**

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

### **CHILDREN NEED TO SEE THE PARENT'S WORKPLACE**

Very young children need to see where Mom or Dad eats, sleeps, and spends some of their day when away from home. You can do this through pictures or TV videos. This provides them with a concrete image of where the parent is when they can't come home. Older children can learn a great deal from the parent about the function of his or her job, the sophisticated technology, interdependence of each division of the military with the other, and of course, career direction.

### **PLAN FOR COMMUNICATING**

Expect children to stay in touch with the departed spouse. A lively discussion needs to take place before departure. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing, such as email, cassette tape exchanges, videos, photographs with their parents, encoded messages, "puzzle messages" (a written letter cut into puzzle parts that must be assembled in order to read), unusual papers for stationery, and pictures drawn by preschoolers.

### **HELP CHILDREN TO PLAN FOR THE DEPARTURE**

While the spouse is packing their bags, allow your children to assist you in some way. Suggest a "swap" of some token, something of your child's that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to the departing spouse.

Discuss the household chores and let your children choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Mother and Father need to agree with each other that division of household chores is reasonable. The role of disciplinarian needs to be supported by the departing member.

### **BEING A LONG DISTANCE PARENT**

Parenting while away from home is not easy. Some separated parents find it so emotionally difficult they withdraw and become significantly less involved in the lives of their children while they are apart. This, of course, is not good either for the parent or the children, not to mention the difficulty it causes the parent/caregiver who is at home alone. The most important aspect of parenting from a distance is making those

small efforts to stay in touch. Doing something to say the parent is thinking about and missing the child is what is most important. Here are some practical suggestions to help keep the absentee parent involved with their children:

Letters and cards from mum or dad are important. The length and contents are not nearly as important as the presence of something in the mail from the absent parent. When sending picture post cards, make little notes about the place or write that you stood right here "x" in the picture. Any small thing which makes the card personal will have tremendous meaning to children at home.

Cut out and send things from the local paper or magazines. This is a tangible way to help them feel connected and give them an idea of what life is like there.

For older children, a subscription to a favourite magazine is a gift that keeps on giving.

When using a tape recorder, remember to be creative: sing "Happy Birthday," tell a story, read scripture, take it with you on your job or when visiting with other members of your unit. Don't try to fill a tape completely in one sitting. Make sure you describe the surroundings, the time of day, and what you are doing, etc.

Try not to forget birthdays and special holidays which would be important to a child, particularly Christmas or Easter,.

Try to schedule phone calls when children are likely to be at home. Keep a mental list of things you want to talk about with each child, such as their friends, school, ball games, etc. Ask each child to send you something from the activities they are involved in at school, home or outside activities like dance lessons, youth groups or scouts.

If your child has a pet, make sure to ask about it.

Send an age appropriate gift for each child. It should be something special just for them. Some interesting and creative gifts include a special notebook for school, a book for colouring or reading, or something unique from where you are stationed.

## TURN ON YOUR SENSORS AND TUNE IN TO YOUR CHILD'S WORRIES ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT OR DEPLOYMENT

Just because a child doesn't tell you about their concerns doesn't mean that they are not troubled. Children don't usually recognize the cause nor will they tell you they are concerned. The spouse that is departing should communicate with each child individually. There is no substitute for a letter with your own name on the envelope. Send postcards, snapshots, and tape recordings of the sounds around you where you are deployed. Use unusual stamps, felt-tip pens, coloured pencils, and different styles of alphabets and lettering.

## TIPS FOR THE SPOUSE LEFT BEHIND

It is very possible you will admit feelings of sadness, self-doubt, fear, or loneliness to your spouse and children. Most parents will agree that these are acceptable risks, and the feelings revealed are much easier to deal with when they can be expressed within the comfort and security of the family.

Be honest about your feelings. Do not attempt to hide feelings--your own or the children's. Many times we try to spare our children from knowledge of our own concerns, self-doubts, and fears.

Give children a method of measuring the passage of time. Families use such techniques as a ceremonial crossing-off of each day on a calendar as it passes, or of tearing a link off a paper chain consisting of the number of days or weeks the departed spouse will be away.

Make sure the departed spouse stays well informed. Do not make the mistake of depriving your spouse of knowledge of what is happening at home, or the way things are being handled, out of fear of "distracting" or "worrying" him or her on the job. ( One parent was "spared" the knowledge that his or her son had to be hospitalized for emergency surgery.)

Be responsible for all disciplining. Do not fall into the trap of using "Just wait until your Father or Mother gets home" as the ultimate threat. How can a child be expected to greet with joy and affections a parent that has been held over their head for months as the ultimate punisher.

(Adapted from an article on the US Air Force website – “Air Force Crossroads at [www.afcrossroads.com](http://www.afcrossroads.com))