

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 length 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)

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- 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