

Children Coping with Deployment

The children of military personnel face many challenges because of deployment to war. Kids need to understand why their parent has to leave, where they are going, and how long they will be away. If you are being deployed, take time to talk to your children about your feelings, what you do on your military job, and what you think of your job. Help them know where you will be and plan ahead to keep in touch regularly and often.

Children also need to understand what will happen when the deployed person returns home. The amount kids can understand and how they cope depends on age and how mature they are.

Protecting children from fear

We cannot protect our children from all that is bad. Yet we can learn to talk to our children about war. Use language that is easy to understand and does not hide the truth. Protect children from needless worries and concerns. Provide them with a sense of security and safety. Children should be assured that everything is being done to bring their loved one home safely and to protect families at home.

It is important that to take the time to discuss and share our own concerns and fears. Do this with other adults, loved ones, friends or counselors, and this will help make it easier on children. Seeking social support from adults outside of the family is one way to manage our own stress. Researchers have found that parents who are able to handle upsetting, traumatic, or conflicting issues can serve as a buffer for the child.

Non-military kids

Civilian children may be concerned and feel afraid too. They may be learning about war from TV, radio, online, or from other sources like friends and school. Children may know someone who has a parent or loved one who went to war. They may be concerned for that person's safety. Parents will need to respond to these concerns. The everyday security of family life may be challenged.

Listen and watch

All parents need to take the time to listen, observe, and talk to their children about what is happening around them. This can teach children good listening and communication skills, respect and support for differing opinions, and ways to manage fears and anxieties.

Even if you prepare and talk to a child, he or she will still be affected. Look for signs of stress. If children have been through trauma in their lives or have difficulties in school or with friends, they may be particularly open to feeling any changes in their sense of safety.

The effects of deployment on children

Researchers have found that children with parents who are deployed to war tend to worry more and be afraid and sad. During war, a child may feel their world is less safe and predictable. Children may fear that the parent or other loved family member who is deployed may die in the war. Even if no close family member is affected, they may still feel unsafe.

- Very young children may show fear or upset at being separated from their parent. Infants (12 months and younger) may react to changes in their schedule, physical environment, or the caretaker's mood. They may be uninterested, refuse to eat, or even lose weight.
- Toddlers (1-3 years) may sulk, cry, throw temper tantrums, or not sleep well if their caretaker is having problems or is not available.

- Preschoolers (3-6 years) might think their parent was deployed because "I was bad." They may react with toileting issues, thumb sucking, sleep problems, clinginess, and separation anxiety. They may also be touchy, depressed, aggressive, or complain about aches and pains.
- Very often, preschool and school-age children also worry about the safety of the parent at home.
- School age children (6-12 years) may perform more poorly in school. They may become moody, aggressive, or whiny. They may get stomachaches, headaches, etc.
- Teens may become angry and act out. They can also withdraw or act like they don't care about things. Adolescents may also not like new family roles and responsibilities after the deployed parent returns home.

Children may play at war, acting out both sides, and creating good outcomes where the "bad guys" are beaten. This does not mean that they are comfortable with or understand real events. Children play best and most creatively when they feel safe. When they feel real threats or the danger of losing a parent, their play is more likely to be anxious and sad. Play doesn't really give them the answers they need for their fear and worry. Children need adults who can help them work through their fears.

Teenagers may deal with anxiety by engaging in risky behaviors. Teens may be better able to understand these events, but even they will need to be assured and comforted.

Is my child okay?

Make sure you are available for your kids. Be there to listen. Parents should pay attention to how their children are playing. If games end with emotions like sadness, aggression, or worry, help the child work out more positive solutions. Above all, kids need to be sure that adults will take care of them as well as they can.

These are some things to watch for:

- Bad temper, difficulties being soothed
- Tearfulness, sadness, talking about things that scare them
- Anger toward people, picking on minority groups
- Getting irritated and fighting with others
- Changes in sleep patterns, trouble sleeping
- More clinging behaviors at home, not wanting to go to school
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, etc.)
- Wanting attention



Talk to help children deal with war

Take the time to talk about war and deployment. Remember that talking can only make your family stronger. Don't ignore the subject. Do not minimize your child's concerns or stressors. Many parents would like to ignore the situation because thinking about war makes them feel vulnerable and powerless to protect their children.

Children need a real message about what is happening around them. Children are very good at knowing when things are being hidden from them. Be truthful and honest regardless of the age of your child, without overburdening him or her.

Children in different age groups will understand differently:

- Very young children are concerned with present everyday life. They need to feel safe. They are affected by the presence or absence of loved ones.
- Younger children may be confused by names of people and places that mean little to them. They may need help in forming basic ideas and understanding.
- Preteens and adolescents will be developing more abstract thinking about ideas and issues and concern for world events. They will be forming strong opinions they want recognized as their own. They may hear ideas from their peers. These ideas and feelings may be in agreement with their families' opinions or not. Yet their ideas and thoughts need to be heard and respected.

Talk about feelings

Encourage your children to freely talk about their concerns and feelings. All children want to be included in family matters. They want to be listened to and understood. They have ideas and feelings but may not know how to express them, or how to handle them. "If war is bad, why is mommy going to war?" "If war is bad, why are we doing it?" "Is killing other people ok?"

Don't be afraid to talk about your feelings, even if you are conflicted or confused. If children know adults are being honest and respectful to them, they will feel safer. Do the best you can, even when you don't know all the answers.

Make your child feel as secure as possible

Make your child feel as secure as possible without changing the facts. For example, you might say to a very young child, "War is happening in another country, far away. But you are safe here and we will take care of you." Or, "Your (dad, mom) will be serving with men and women who will do the best job possible to protect (him, her) and bring (him, her) home safely."

Provide reassurance about the future. Be hopeful about the future. "Yes these are hard times, but we are hopeful that people will be able to overcome their differences and live more peacefully in the future."

Accept different opinions

Try to look at and explain the points of view from all sides of a conflict. Teach the importance of respect and give and take. Be sure that children understand that violence is not always the best solution. Whether you are for or against war, take the time to explain how democracy works. Explain how to respect all points of view, just as in your family, each person wants their opinion to be respected and heard.

Explain why you agree or disagree with war in terms your child can understand. For example: "I don't like war, but it seems this is the best way to keep us safe," or "I understand why some people want to fight, but I believe that the only way to peace is negotiation, not violence."

Things to do to help children cope with war

- Provide extra attention, care, and physical closeness.
- Understand that they may be angry (and perhaps rightly so).
- Limit exposure to news, especially when news repeats and is violent. Younger children should be shielded from this kind of news as much as possible. It will needlessly increase their worry of events they don't understand.

- Respect your child's timing and ways of coping. Very young children may want to close their eyes or just go out and play. Don't confront children or force them to talk about things when they don't want to.
- Keep an open door for the absent parent or loved one. Talk with him or her as often as possible, and for important dates like birthdays, holidays, etc. Talk about what it will be like when that person returns and what it would be like if they were here now. This is really important for younger children who may not understand why their loved one is not here.
- Help your children develop and enjoy fun activities. Distraction can make time go by faster.
- Stick to routines and plan for upcoming events.
- Suggest positive and creative ways of coping for older children and adolescents (create scrapbooks and videos, write letters take photos).
- Discuss things. Let kids know they can talk about how they feel. Accept how they feel and don't tell them they should not feel that way.
- Tell kids their feelings are normal. Be prepared to tell them many times.



SOURCE:

The information in this document was adapted from *Children Coping with Deployment*, United States Department of Veteran Affairs: National Center for PTSD at:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/children-coping-deployment.asp>