

# *When a Parent is Deployed*

## Family Separation and Readiness—Children's Issues

*Parents can help children understand and accept the separation.*



### **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 Mommy or Daddy will desert them.

Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. 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 behavior. When changes occur, children usually have no other way to release anxieties, and nowhere to go for help. At a time when the spouse readies to deploy, the remaining spouse may feel overwhelmed, as he or she prepares to solely support the children and home.

### **What can be done about relieving the stress of the pre-family separation period?**

Consider the following ideas, which have been helpful to others in similar situations.

### **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 the child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left uninformed. Knowing about the deployment in advance helps family members adjust to the idea.

### **Building an Emotional Bond**

The departing parent needs to spend quality time with each child before he or she leaves. Do not be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is a powerful communication.

Use this time to share pride in your work and the purpose for your deployment. Many school-age children understand that some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier to let go if mom or dad's job is seen as essential to the country.

Often when asked if something is bothering them, a child will say "no." But there are ways to get through. Make a casual reference to your own worries or ambivalent feelings about the impending assignment or deployment.





This helps a child realize that his or her 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**

Children frequently react to the deployment of a parent 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.

### **Plan for Communicating**

Expect children to stay in touch with the departed spouse. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing.

### **Help Children to Plan for the Departure**

When the spouse is packing his or her bags, allow the children to assist in some way. Suggest a “swap” of some token, something of the child’s that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to the departing parent. Discuss the household chores and let the children choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Mother and father need to agree with each other that the division of household chores is reasonable. The role of disciplinarian needs to be supported by the departing parent.

### **Being a Long-Distance Parent**

Parenting while away from home is not easy. 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. The following are some practical suggestions to help keep the absentee parent involved with his or her children:

- Letters and cards from mom 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 postcards, make little notes about the place or write

that you stood right “here”—“x” in the picture. Any small thing that makes the card personal will have tremendous meaning to children at home.

- When using a tape recorder, remember to be creative: sing “Happy Birthday,” tell a story, read inspirational material, or take it with you on your job or when visiting with other members of your working group. Do not try to fill a tape completely in one sitting. Make sure you describe details such as your surroundings, the time of day, and what you are doing.
- Try not to forget birthdays and special holidays that might be important to a child, particularly Thanksgiving, religious holidays, Halloween, or Valentine’s Day.
- 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 his or her friends, school, and sports. Ask each child to send you something from the activities they are involved in at school, home, or outside activities, such as dance lessons, youth groups, or scouts. If your child has a pet, make sure to ask about it.
- **TURN ON YOUR SENSORS AND TUNE IN TO YOUR CHILD’S WORRIES ABOUT THE DEPLOYMENT.** Just because a child does not tell you about their concerns does not mean that they are not troubled. Children do not 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. Again, send postcards, snapshots, and tape recordings of the sounds around you where you are deployed. Let them know you are thinking of and loving them.

*This material is adapted from the “Predeployment Guide: A Tool for Coping” on the Air Force Crossroads Web site at <http://www.afcrossroads.com/famseparation>.*