

STAYING CONNECTED

...to your School-Aged Child



Your school-aged child understands that Mommy or Daddy will be far away and gone for a long time. Creative activities can encourage your child to talk about emotions and may help your child better understand the separation.

● BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

- > **Prepare your child** for irregular contact with the soon-to-be deployed parent.
 - Describe in age appropriate ways that the deployed parent will not always have access to a phone or computer.
- > **Create audio or video recordings** of the soon-to-be deployed parent that your child can watch or listen to whenever they want, like reading your child's favorite book.
 - Make special recordings for special occasions – sing happy birthday to your child.
 - Write letters or notes to your child to be brought out during special events, like at holidays.
- > **Take family photos and put them in visible places around the house.**
- > **The soon-to-be deployed parent should prepare verbally to express caring.**
 - There is no one “right” way to show your child that you love him but all children need to know how much they are cherished.
 - ~ Some of us are *physical* and show our love by wrestling or becoming a “Daddy jungle gym.” Others demonstrate how much we care by being *physically present* at events that are important to children, like PTA meetings, recitals, and sporting events.
 - ~ Sometimes being *physical* or being present at events is easier than using words to express how much we care. This might be particularly true if our own parents didn't use words to let us know how much they loved us.
 - It is impossible for the deployed parent to be either *physical* or *physically present* from a distance.
 - ~ The only way of expressing love and appreciation from afar may be with words. It sounds simple, but it can be hard work to become comfortable telling your child with words how much you love them.



● DURING DEPLOYMENT

- > **The home-based parent should talk about the deployed parent every day but be careful about when your child might want to hear about Mommy.** Missing someone is a sad feeling and not all children want to be reminded to miss their parent and think happy thoughts on your cue.
 - Consider sharing what Mommy's favorite song is and listening to it together.
 - At lunchtime you might say, “Grilled cheese is Mommy's favorite meal on a cold day.”
- > **A child can never hear, “Your Mommy/Daddy loves you and misses you,” too often.**

- > **Your child's comfort with deployment may increase if he or she has a better understanding of what deployment is really like.**
 - The deployed parent might send photos of his quarters to give the child a sense of where Daddy sleeps, eats, or exercises.
 - The home-based parent might post a map of the deployment location with photos of the deployed parent in uniform.
- > **Find a way to show your child how long the deployed parent will be away.**
 - Make a countdown calendar.
 - Create a paper chain and add a new link each day the parent is away.
 - Move pennies between two jars to signify time passing.
- > **Involve your child in creative projects to help encourage connection with the deployed parent.**
 - Help her email or text her favorite knock-knock joke.
 - Help her make and send a postcard using cardboard and markers.
 - Help her prepare a scrapbook and fill it with homework, photos and drawings to share with the deployed parent upon return.

● PREPARING TO PLUG IN

> Prepare your child for phone conversations.

- Your child may feel nervous or uncomfortable when asked to talk about his feelings or what he has been up to over the phone.
- It is a lot of pressure on a child to have to remember a week's activities, especially if a call comes at an unscheduled time that did not allow the family time to prepare.



Always remember that children draw their sense of security from their parents.

They sense whether or not their parents are okay. So never forget that the greatest gift you can give your child is to take care of yourself.

> Create a "Communication Center."

- Stock the communication center with a bulletin board, pens, post-it notes, and a calendar so your child can take notes or draw pictures about important events and feelings he wants to share with the deployed parent during their next communication.
- The communication center should have a section for every child and/or teen. The home-based parent might find it helpful to have his/her own section as well.
- When the deployed parent calls home, everybody can run to the communication board and have everything they want to talk about right in front of them. The conversations will be more meaningful because the pressure is off.
 - ~ Now, when the deployed parent asks questions like, "How are you?" and "What news do you have to tell me?," he'll get full answers instead of "Fine" and "Nothing really."

> Prepare yourself for phone conversations.

- The hardest part of staying connected for the deployed parent has little to do with distance. It is really hard to switch from a war zone mentality to being a parent instantly.
- The home-based parent can make it a bit easier by following two strategies:

1. Send email or text prompts before the deployed parent is going to call home.

- ~ If the deployed parent calls home without remembering the test, big game, or special school trip, the child may be disappointed. Maybe more importantly, the deployed parent may begin to feel badly about his/her parenting abilities. This cycle can be avoided by sending emails or texts in advance *“Shawn has his big soccer game on Tuesday, Emily’s Lacrosse team just won County Championships, and Sophie’s ballet recital was last night.”*

2. Have the deployed parent use a “Code Word” in the beginning of calls that tells the home-based parent either “keep it light tonight” or “we can talk about anything on your mind.”

- ~ There is a lot to talk about when a parent is deployed. But sometimes there is so much to handle over there that even the most caring parent can’t be expected to take on new problems. The deployed parent still wants to call home, but is worried she won’t say the right thing or knows that she just can’t be distracted by a problem. At the same time, the home-based parent has anxiety over how much to share.
- ~ The “Code Word” solves this problem for both parents. It should be a word or phrase that only the two of them know and that can easily be slipped into the opening sentence or two of the conversation. *“Is it as hot there as it is here?” might mean “let’s just touch base and keep it light tonight.” “Great weather finally” might mean “Let’s talk about everything on your mind.”*

- > **Technology such as Skype is a wonderful way to stay connected, but can also expose a child to frightening sights and sounds.** The deployed parent should try to send photos and make calls from a quiet place and to keep weapons out of view.

● DISCIPLINE

- > **Discipline is such an important part of parenting, that it is essential to maintaining a healthy connection between parent and child.** Appropriate discipline is key to raising children who are well-behaved, have self-control, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.
- > **It is critical that the deployed parent find a way to be involved in the teaching and guidance that are at the core of discipline, but it is simply not possible for he or she to be involved with day-to-day problems.**
 - It is frustrating for a deployed parent to focus on problems, especially when she cannot really fix them.
 - Likewise, they should not be involved in giving out consequences while far away because:
 - ~ It will fill the limited time available for communication with tension, making the children dread the contacts. Don’t use the deployed parent as a threat – *“Wait till we call your Father”* – or your child will not look forward to talking to him.
 - ~ Consequences are really more effective when they are given close to the misbehavior. They lose their effectiveness if not given soon and should not be given in anger. A parent should take time to collect herself before deciding on an appropriate response to a misbehavior. *“Wait til we speak to your Mother on Wednesday”* does not work because both too much time will have lapsed and it takes away from the pleasure of the conversation.

Be Aware of Your Child’s Stress

Even children whose parents have done everything right to help their child stay connected during deployment, will still find their parent’s absence stressful.

Sometimes children faced with stressful situations may slip back into acting as if they were younger (like wetting their bed) or complain of stomachaches or headaches.

Some steps back in behavior may resolve with calm reassurance.

Explain that we all sometimes go through upsets when things change around us.

Be sure to review ongoing symptoms with your child’s doctor if you are concerned.



> **The good news is that there are two ways that the deployed parent can be engaged in promoting the core principles of discipline from a distance:**

1. **Creating Clear Expectations and Consequences In Advance.** The deployed parent can be part of a pre-deployment family discussion that makes behavioral expectations and consequences very clear for each child.
2. **Reinforcing Positive Behaviors.** The most important part of discipline has nothing to do with punishment or correction. The key to raising well-disciplined children is to reinforce positive behaviors. This is a perfect role for a deployed parent.
 - *“I heard that you have been really helpful around the house. Thanks so much!”*
 - *“Grandma told me how helpful you were when her friend needed her lawn mowed. I expect you to be the kind of man who always wants to help out. You make me proud.”*
 - *“So your math teacher really noticed how much work you are putting in this semester. It’s only hard work and commitment that will get you anywhere. I am so happy that you’ve learned that lesson.”*

School-aged children understand separation and feel the stress of missing their deployed parent. Creative activities that maintain strong connections between the deployed parent and the child can help ease the strain of separation. Well prepared communication plans between parents is also key in maintaining an at home atmosphere that leaves children feeling loved and secure.

FREE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO HELP ENHANCE CONNECTION:

- For free templates of cards and postcards: www.deploymentkids.com
- For more information on creating care packages: www.operationmilitarypride.com or <http://www.anysoldier.com/>
- To set up a community support group for your soldier’s unit: www.adoptaplatoon.com
- Create a read-aloud videotape for your child: www.unitedthroughreading.org/military
- For colorable greeting cards for children of all ages: <http://www.showtroopsupport.org/>
- Share experiences, post pictures and videos, write blogs, and create discussion boards in a secure online community for military families: <https://apps.mhf.dod.mil/homefrontconnections/hfc.html>
- For a training on communication: <http://www.focusproject.org/resources>
- For information on creating “Flat Daddies / Mommies”: <http://flatdaddies.com/>

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