



MAINTAINING CONNECTION

...during Deployment with Your Teenager

Adolescents are aware of the realities associated with deployment. They understand that their family will change for a while. You can make sure that your teen stays connected to both the home-based and deployed parent by supporting open family communication about how the deployment is affecting everyone differently in the family.

● BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

> Prepare your teen for irregular contact.

- Write letters, birthday cards or “prom cards” so that your teen will know that although the deployed parent can’t be present, he wishes he could.

> Create audio or video recordings for special occasions.

- A deployed parent might have to miss a Sweet Sixteen or a Quinceañera, but his wisdom about growing into adulthood can be shared through a prerecorded video.

> Agree ahead of time how much information the deployed parent and home parent want to know about what is going on in each other’s lives.

> The soon-to-be deployed parent should prepare to verbally 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 really *physical* and show our love by playing sports or working out together. Others demonstrate how much we care by being *physically present* at important events like PTA meetings, recitals, and games.
 - ~ Sometimes playing sports together 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 may be with words. It sounds simple, but it can be hard work to become comfortable talking about feelings with your teens.

● DURING DEPLOYMENT

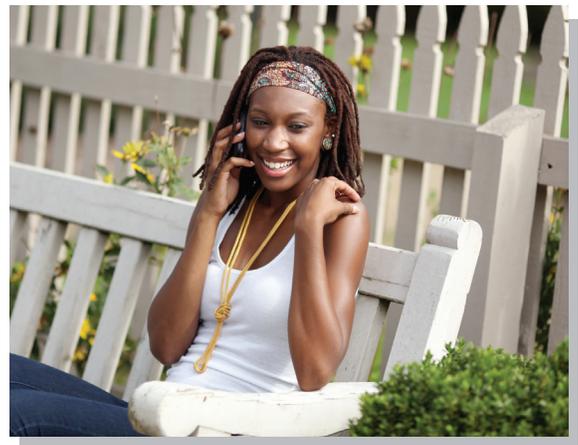
> Prepare yourself for phone conversations.

- 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 or big game, the teen 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: *“Damon is upset because last Friday he wasn’t allowed to stay the night at Jason’s house without parents there”* or *“Maria was asked on a date.”*



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 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.”*

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.

- > **Have your teen write emails or letters about what they have been up to, or create homemade postcards to mail to the deployed parent.**
- > **Prepare memories to share with the deployed parent when he returns.**
 - Create a scrapbook and fill it with homework and photos.
 - Take a video recording of your teen at recitals or sports events.
- > **Help your teen become “connected to the mission” by being active on the home front.** Encourage him to send care packages to service members or to join a “support the troops” effort.
- > **Watch the news together and monitor your teen’s reactions to media coverage as well as their friends’ reactions to the war.** Offer to talk about war at a level that matches your teen’s development.

- > **Suggest that your teen expresses or communicates his feelings by writing in a journal.** Remind him that you will respect his privacy and not read the journal. It is his place to write-out and think-through anything on his mind. Always encourage him to share important thoughts and emotions with you as well.

● **MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS**

- > **Remind the deployed parent that teenagers often do not open up about their feelings at the time we wish they would talk.** One moment a teen will speak only with grunts and say that everything is *“fine,”* while acting like they resent you even asking. The next moment, the same teen will curl up in your lap and begin sharing. We can’t expect teenagers to change just because one of their parents is far away.

- It is not a rejection of a parent when a teen chooses to be silent. This is a good reason to communicate using a few different ways so the teen can open up on their time, always knowing that you may not respond immediately.
- Skype might be the best way to communicate, but emails, letters, and texts, allow the teen to choose the time and space to communicate.

> **Do not expect your teen to take over as an “adult in your household.** Realize and appreciate when he takes on new roles and responsibilities. Make sure he still has time for himself and still understands that he is in need of supervision and monitoring.



- The truth is that you'll need extra help around the house and with younger siblings while your spouse or partner is away. It is natural to ask older children and teens to take on these new roles.
- It is even common to make them feel extra special with statements like, *“While your dad is away, you are the man of the house.”*

> **There are two major reasons why treating our teens as “adults” can backfire.**

- They may feel that they need to be “perfect” in this role. Their desire to prove themselves perfect or fully independent may interfere with them reaching out to adults when they really need it.
- It may harm the connection with the deployed parent when he or she reenters the home.
 - ~ We know that teenagers sometimes struggle with their returning parent. One of the reasons may be that they resent losing some of the freedoms and independence they have gained. Imagine, being told you are the man of the house one week and then having to accept supervision again when your father returns. It is a setup for resentment and rebellion. A teen might say, *“How can you tell me what to do all of a sudden, when you've been gone and I've been doing your job?”*

~ It is important to let our children know how much we appreciate them helping out, but it is equally as important that they know that they still are not yet adults and need to be parented.

> **Your teen may experience a range of emotions during deployment.**

- Be aware of signs of depression - decreased appetite, changes in sleeping pattern, increased irritability and anger, acting disconnected or disengaged. Seek help from a primary care provider when concerned about your teen's mental health.
- Be a role model for how to reduce stress in healthy ways. Exercise, eat healthy, and ask others for support.

● 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.

> **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.”*
- 3. The deployed parent can assure that his opinion is included in disciplinary measures by helping develop a “Contract” prior to deployment.**
 - This strategy makes parents’ expectations clear and keeps the deployed parent’s views “present” even when he or she is on the other side of the world.
 - This strategy allows the teen to understand precisely why she gains or loses privileges. Rather than feeling “punished” in a way she considers unfair, she will understand that it was her behavior that created the consequence.

Follow these step-by-step procedures to create your own “Contract”

- 1. Sit down with each adolescent several weeks before deployment.**
- 2. Have both adults reinforce how much they want her to grow up to be responsible and independent. Be honest about the ways in which she has demonstrated growth, maturity, and responsibility.**
- 3. Have her write down or discuss the freedoms and privileges that she believes she has earned.**
- 4. The adults determine which ones they think she is ready for as well.**
- 5. The adults share what they need to know to make sure that she will be safe and successful with each new privilege.**
- 6. Parent(s) and teen sign the contract after they have reached an understanding of expectations.**

READ ON FOR A SAMPLE “CONTRACT”!



CONTRACT

1. I want a curfew of 10 pm on weeknights and 11:30 pm on weekends
2. I want to be able to drive the car when mom doesn't need it

CONTRACT TIPS

- > The contract can be reevaluated every 3 months or during mid deployment leaves.
- > If the teen has acted responsibly then new privileges can be added when the contract is reassessed.
- > If the teen acts irresponsibly then the privilege is lost and the new expectations return to the point where the teen has demonstrated responsibility.
- > Even though the deployed parent is not "present" he was when the agreement was made. Therefore, his "voice" can be included when the consequence is given.
"Unfortunately, you have not been able to keep up with your homework. Your father and I agreed with you that in order to stay out late all of your homework had to be done. You were keeping up nicely when your curfew was set at 9:15, so we'll return to that for a while. If you do really well, we'll reconsider a later curfew again."

Parent adds what they need to be sure the teen will be safe and responsible.

CONTRACT

1. I want a curfew of 10 pm on weeknights and 11:30 pm on weekends
 - > We need to know where you are, whom you're with, and what you'll be doing.
 - > We need you to call us after dark so we know exactly where you'll be.
 - > You can't go to any parties where there is no adult supervision.
 - > If you are going to stay out late for any reason, then:
 - All of your homework has to be done before you go out.
 - You still have to be able to get enough sleep and wake up easily to go to school.
 - You have to call home so we don't have to worry.
2. I want to be able to drive the car when mom doesn't need it
 - > We need you to sign a "Students Against Destructive Decisions Contract For Life" that assures us that if you were ever in trouble you would call us (<http://sadd.org/contract.htm>).
 - > You can't drive any friends for the first 6-12 months of driving.
 - > You must ALWAYS wear seatbelts.
 - > You will check to be sure you have enough gas and that the tires have enough pressure before every trip.
 - > You will never use a cell phone or text while driving.
 - > No nighttime driving for the first 6 months of driving.

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Teens understand that their family will change for a while when their parent is deployed. Creative activities that maintain strong connections between the deployed parent and the teen can help ease the strain of separation during such an important time of development. Since teens don't often open up about their feelings when we wish they would talk, well prepared communication and discipline plans between teens and both of their parents are essential to keeping family ties strong during times of separation.

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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