

Staying Connected

By Jennifer G. Williams

Helping Children Deal with Separation



Electronics Technician 2nd Class Sam HerediaPerez greets his 7-year-old daughter during a special reunion at Dinsmore Elementary School in Jacksonville, Fla., in February. HerediaPerez, assigned to the naval Air Station Jacksonville Air Operations Ground Electronic Maintenance Division, had been deployed to Afghanistan as an individual augmentee for the past nine months. Photo courtesy U.S. Navy, by Kaylee LaRocque

Anyone who has had to deal with children at home while a parent away on a deployment or even a TDY knows it's a full-time job to be their sole caregiver.

But experts agree that the children aren't the only ones who need to be cared for in these situations. Taking care of yourself can help you and your child get through the rough times more smoothly.

"When things aren't going well in a TDY or deployment, it's usually not the kids," says Karen Pavlicin, the award-winning author of *Surviving Deployment: A guide for military families* and *Life After Deployment: Military families share reunion stories and advice*. "If we as parents look to ourselves first, we can usually turn around any situation with our own actions. It's not about controlling kids, it's about enabling them."

"If we are patient," she says, "especially in transition times (such as getting ready for school), and if we

are taking good care of ourselves and keeping a positive healthy attitude, etcetera, our kids will follow. We're all going to have those trying times, just remember that we're the adults!"

Pavlicin encourages parents to keep routines simple and to "remember that to a kid, routine is as much about the order of things as it is about the time of day." For example, for nighttime routines, kids of any age have an easier time sleeping if bedtime is around the same time each evening. "But let's say the usual bedtime for a

child is 8:00 and the usual bedtime routine is to put on jammies at 7:30, then have a snack, then brush teeth, then read a book, then lights out at 8," she says.

"Now, let's say you have an evening commitment that gets your family home at 8," she continues. "That doesn't mean straight to bed. As the parent, you might be thinking bedtime at 8 is the routine. But your kid is thinking, 'what about my snack and book?' To avoid a meltdown, have a smaller snack or read a shorter book, but keep the same basic steps in the routine."

And the basics, says Pavlicin, are simple. "Make sure kids get the basics every day—healthy food, exercise, and good sleep. Getting the basics helps all of us have a better day—parents, you need at least two out of three of these every day in order to be fair to your kids!" Another important way to help your children through the stresses of separation—and one that is often forgotten by a parent eager to keep themselves and their children busy—is to let kids be kids. "They need stress-free time to be goofy, creative kids," says Pavlicin.

One veteran military mom said she's seen too many parents stress out themselves and their children by piling on too many activities. The goal, she said, was to keep busy and time would go faster—the result was not pretty. So while keeping busy is important, try not to overcommit you or your children. It can be exhausting, and it will be impossible to maintain once your loved one returns.

Boundaries are Good

"Many of us who have coped with deployment before can vouch for the fact that our kids sometimes seem a bit restless, often moody and occasionally downright unmanageable," says Rachel Robertson, author of the *Deployment Journal for Kids* and several articles on helping

children through deployments. "It is important to remember that these behaviors are often the way children express negative feelings like fear, worry, anxiety, and loneliness."

"Children show us how they are feeling by their actions more than their words," she adds, "so we must pay careful attention to body language and behavior. While parents need not allow inappropriate behavior, simply punishing these behaviors won't stop them, and may actually compound them."

And while it may be tempting to give in, setting and keeping boundaries is of the utmost importance while one parent is away, says Pavlicin. "Kids want structure even though they rebel against it," she says. "Consistent rules, consequences and rewards help them know what's expected and help them feel safe." But, she adds, it's important for parents to know when to be flexible and when to hold fast.

Keep in Touch

"Kids are very tangible," says Pavlicin. "They respond to what they can see, hear and touch. So regardless of the length of the separation, anything that can help kids feel a connection is good." For example, the absent parent is in a different time zone, you can put two clocks in the kitchen—one on local time and one on deployed time. Take a photo of the child and parent and let the child keep the photo in a backpack or journal to always have it nearby.

Find simple ways the child can connect with the deployed

parent on a regular basis. "This can be as simple as putting school papers in an envelope and mailing a letter each week or reading the same book and emailing questions or comments," she says. "Anything that connects the child's interests with the parent and helps them keep communicating and building their individual relationship."

You can also help your child see both parents as heroes and to understand that they play an important role too—showing them how they serve their country as a military family member (being strong while their loved one is away, for example) will help them feel a bond with the military parent. "Tell them other kids will look to them as an example—kids love to be role models," says Pavlicin. "My son and I talk about how it's important for all of us to serve our country in some way—along with the privilege of living here comes responsibilities. Just one of the many ways we can serve is being in the military (and being in a military family)—and it's one of the most respected and reserved for those who are the bravest!"

Other military children across the country have shown their support for our troops through writing letters and sending care packages to service members overseas. Helping children find

continued on page 26



ways to contribute will make them feel a part of the patriotic effort as a whole.

Talking the Talk

The most important thing you can do is be honest with your kids—but at their own level of understanding. Pavlicin illustrates this by comparing it to talking about sex with your children—you speak differently to a six-year-old than to a 16-year-old. “The main difference is in the amount of detail and how it applies to their behavior and attitude toward sex,” she says. “Well, the same applies to deployment missions, safety, and other questions kids have when separated from a parent.”

“If a child is asking, that’s a good thing,” she adds. “The child trusts you to tell them the truth and to help them feel safe and loved. In the absence of information, kids will make it up themselves or go to less credible sources for information.”

“I find the best times to talk with kids are when it seems informal and natural to have a discussion—such as in the car on the way home from school, while eating dinner, or playing a board or card game,” says Pavlicin. “Times when you are already together and talking about your day or the weather... those are great moments to encourage kids to talk about how things are going with friends, with school, or anything they might be concerned about.”

Children often feel a loss of control and stability in a deployment situation,” says Robertson. “They have experienced a major change and could do nothing to prevent it from occurring” she says. “Reminding them that you will always love them no matter what and that you will survive this deployment together will help ease their anxiety.”

And yours. ●

There are several books to help children and parents deal with the separation of a loved one in the military. Here are just a few:

We Serve Too! A Child’s Deployment Book By Kathleen Edick and Paula J. Johnson (ages 3-8)

Mommy You’re My Hero and Daddy You’re My Hero By Michelle Ferguson-Cohen (ages 4-8)

Night Catch By Brenda Ehrmantraut (ages 3-8)

Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom By Lisa Tucker McElroy (ages 4-12)

When Dad’s at Sea By Mindy Pelton (ages 4-8)

My Red Balloon By Eve Bunting (ages 3-12)

Red, White and Blue, Good-bye By Sarah Wones Tomp (ages 3-8)

Deployment Journal for Kids By Rachel Robertson (ages 5-adult)

The Kissing Hand By Audrey Penn (ages 4-12)

Brisky Bear and Trooper Dog: Be Kind, Be Friendly, Be Thankful (with CD)
By Steve Bolt & Phil Callaway (ages 4-8)

Surviving Deployment: A guide for military families by Karen M. Pavlicin

Life After Deployment: Military families share reunion stories and advice by Karen M. Pavlicin

The Wishing Tree by Mary Redman



The U.S. Army Child and Youth Services Department recommends the following websites as resources for children and deployment:

Deploymentkids.com
www.deploymentkids.com

A site sponsored by Elva Resa Publishing, publishers of *Deployment Journal for Kids*. Offers free downloadable activities, including a time-zone chart, distance calculator, and spotlights on different areas of the world where a parent might be deployed.

Military OneSource
www.militaryonesource.com

DoD-sponsored site offering resources on preparing and dealing with deployment are offered to military families.

National Military Families Association
www.nmfa.org (Click on Deployment and You)
Offers information including what to expect regarding communicating with the service member during the deployment, who to go to for information or assistance when the service member is gone, what support services are available.

Military Child Education Coalition
www.militarychild.org (Click on Deployment/Separation tab at top of page)
Information for parents, teachers and counselors and resources that provide school support to children during the deployment.

Sesame Street – talk, listen, connect
www.sesameworkshop.org/tlc/index.php
Sesame Workshop and Wal-Mart stores partnered to create resources to assist military families to cope with concerns experienced during phases of deployment.

Activities to Do

There are many simple things the parent at home can do to have fun with their children and make this time memorable. Here are some examples:

- Have Family Fun Nights – Have each child take turns selecting an activity.
- Take turns planning dinners for each other.
- Keep a family timeline during the deployment on a large piece of paper taped on the wall.
- Make a video of the family during deployment. Plan, edit and produce it just like a movie.
- Have board game tournaments.
- Keep a scrapbook.
- Buy a mini-tape recorder and record messages to the deployed parent. Make sure they have a recorder too so they can send messages back.
- Check out a copy of the Guinness Book of World records and try to beat some of the records.
- Draw a circle on a map with an eighty-mile radius from your house. Pick a new place to explore within that circle each weekend.
- Teach your kids to dance.

—courtesy Rachel Robertson