

Children & Deployments

By Sara Graves

Spouses almost always experience some stress when a family member is deployed, but children may also feel a sense of loss and abandonment that they can't fully express, and will look to the parent to mirror their emotions. Likewise, some children may display disruptive behavior in reaction to the change of the family unit. Here are some tried-and-true methods to help parents prepare their children for a deployment.

Communicate with Your Children

It is better for a parent to be honest with their child about a deployment and what is going to occur, how he or she feels about it and how they can work as a family to cope with the other parent being away. This will reduce the child's fears.

Spend Time with Your Child

The deploying family member should spend some one-on-one time with each child prior to departing. Younger children will readily accept the attention, while older children may pretend to be old enough to handle the separation on their own.

The deploying parent should explain to the child why he or she is leaving and how important it is that they go for the sake of the country. Children will have an easier time accepting the loss if they feel that the parent is performing a critical role while he or she is away.

To get a child to express his or her feelings openly, it is helpful for the deploying parent to express his or her own worries. Express honestly the hopes and fears felt as a parent leaving. The child is likely to relate to the feelings and share theirs in return.

Bring Your Children to Your Workplace

It can be hard for children to understand what their parent is doing when he or she is called away. Bringing the children to the workplace, either physically or through pictures or videos, can help them relate to where the parent is when he or she doesn't come home.

Involve Your Children in the Departure

Involving children in the departure will help them feel useful in the process. Parents should also allow their children to have a say in what additional chores they will accept while the deployed parent is away.

In addition, the children should be present when the parent deploys. It will help them emotionally prepare for the separation.

Instead of returning home immediately, the at-home parent should take the children on a special outing. This will help divert the children's attention from the loss of the day.

Keep Your Children Involved During the Deployment

As the parent staying behind, avoid bottling up feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness and anger. Children will naturally pick up on the emotions as they look to their parent as a model. It is better to establish an environment where children are encouraged to speak openly about their feelings.

The family should have some way to measure how much time has elapsed and how long it will be until the deployed member returns. Some families mark off each day on a calendar. The family should establish a set time each week to discuss what they would like to say or write next to the deployed parent.

Get the children involved in keeping in contact with the deployed service member. They can draw pictures or write letters of their own.

In turn, it is equally important for the deployed member to remain in touch with his or her children. Postcards, pictures with captions, and local newspapers or publications will help the children feel connected to where the parent is and what living conditions are like there. If feasible, send a personal item or letter for each child when mailing anything home.

The deployed parent should schedule times to recognize important days to the children including birthdays, holidays and special events, like recitals or plays. If necessary, keep a calendar handy of these days. The at-home spouse should also remind the deployed parent well in advance of these upcoming days/events.

The more the family discusses and gets involved in the deployment, the easier it will be for all family members to accept the change. 

