

# Helping Children Cope During Deployment

From *Courage to Care*, A Health Promotion Campaign from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

Helping children cope with the deployment of a parent —whether you are a parent or a family caregiver — can be difficult.

Experts in military medicine and family trauma who understand the impact of deployment on families have written this fact sheet. It is in the form of commonly asked questions followed by their responses. It is important to remember that while deployments are stressful, they also provide opportunities for families to grow closer and stronger.

## Commonly Asked Questions from Parents About Deployment

### Q. What is the best way to prepare children for deployment?

**A.** Parents must be honest, and focus on their children's safety, security and continuity of routine. If deployment will

change the child's lifestyle such as moving, living with grandparents, or changing childcare, school or community activities, the child needs to hear of these things in advance.

### Q. How else can we reassure our children about a deployment?

**A.** First, parents should digest the information before they communicate it to children so they can deliver it in a calm and reassuring manner. Second, children worry about the safety of the deployed parent. It is important to let children know that the deployed parent is trained to do their job. Third, it is important to communicate in a way that your child will understand based on their age.

### Q. How do children signal their distress?

**A.** Stress affects children like it does adults. Children may complain of headaches, stomach distress and sleep disturbances. They may display moodiness, irritability, low energy, and have more dramatic reactions to minor situations such as stubbing a toe. It can be difficult sometimes to sort out normal distress and more serious problems. If in doubt, seek medical advice.

### Q. Are there ways to reduce stress on children during the separation?

**A.** Yes, one very positive way is emphasize to your children that they have a job that is as REAL as that of the deployed parent. Stress is often the result of feeling helpless or unsure or unclear about a new role or situation. It is important to reinforce that doing well in school, helping out at home and being cooperative is a skill set that is part of their job, one that is valued and unique to their being a military child. When children do their job they help support their parent's mission.

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

***My Red Balloon*** by Eve Bunting (ages 3-12)

***Night Catch*** by Brenda Ehrmantraut (ages 3-8)

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

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

***H is for Honor: A Military Family Alphabet***  
by Devin Scillian (ages 4-8)

***The Invisible String*** by Patrice Karst (ages 4-8)

***The Kissing Hand*** by Audrey Penn (ages 4-12)

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

***Mommy You're My Hero and Daddy You're My Hero***  
by Michelle Ferguson-Cohen (ages 4-8)

***My Dad's Deployment: A deployment and reunion activity book for young children***  
by Julie LaBelle and Christina Rodriguez (ages 4-8)

***A Paper Hug*** by Stephanie Skolmoski (ages 4-8)

***When Dad's at Sea*** by Mindy Pelton (ages 4-8)

***The Wishing Tree*** by Mary Redman (ages 4-8)

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

***Surviving Deployment: A guide for military families***  
by Karen M. Pavlicin (whole family)

### Q. How should school problems be handled?

**A.** If there is concern about a child's behavior at home, parents should notify the school. Many parents may be reluctant to call attention to their child by warning school officials, but it is important for the school to be alert to any unusual symptoms. If a child has had psychiatric issues before the deployment they are more likely to have problems as a result of the deployment. It is important to talk to your child about any acting out, and get them to discuss their feelings and issues. Your child's school or your primary care doctor can arrange for counseling services. ●

## The United Through Reading® Military Program

helps ease the stress of separation for military families by having deployed parents read children's books aloud via DVD for their child to watch at home.

This powerful program is available to all deploying military units and at select USO locations. It provides parents a chance to make powerful and lasting connections with their children and parent from afar.

Ideally, deploying commands request United Through Reading® Military Program several months before deployment so that our National Program Managers can train command volunteers and spouse volunteers, provide promotional tools, and offer options for getting necessary equipment.

Today, our National Program Managers are working directly with more than 200 Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and National Guard commands, including more than 60 select USO locations that are hosting United Through Reading Military Program. Visit [www.unitedthroughreading.org](http://www.unitedthroughreading.org) for more information or locations.

# Keeping Kids Connected with their Parents

By Jenn Rowell

Staying connected with children through deployments has always been difficult for military families, but new technology and creativity have helped improve the lines of communication for many.

For Samantha Dean, keeping her young daughter, Cailin, in touch with her deployed Marine father was vital.

Her husband, Caleb Dean, is currently a sergeant with Combat Logistics Battalion 3 in Hawaii. When he deployed in 2009, he was a corporal with Marine Wing Communications Squadron 24 out of Cherry Point, N.C.

During that deployment, he was near computers and the phone so the family was able to talk a few times a week. But because of the time difference and their daughter's young age, she was asleep many of the times he was able to call.

Samantha took tons of photos of daily life with the little girl and emailed them to her husband. She also posted photos on Facebook and their blog so he could check them whenever he had time or access.

Skype and email helped the Marine keep up in the little things happening at home and helped Cailin feel less distant from her father.

"My daddy is away. And I miss him. He is not here right now. He is there."

That's the beginning of *Over There*, an illustrated book that military family life consultants sometimes use to help young children understand where their deployed parents are and why they aren't home with them.

"I do the same things here...that he does there," the book states. "I brush my teeth here. He brushes his teeth there. I play here. He plays there."



Samantha Dean and Cailin

Caleb sent Cailin a Daddy Doll, a growing trend with military families.

Families can send photos of their service member in uniform to a company that puts the photo on fabric and makes a doll out of it.

Cailin took the doll with her everywhere. She also had a Daddy Bear from his first deployment, which was a bear that played a voice recording of him telling her he loved her.

For another Air Force wife, "Judy"—who did not want to be identified since her husband is currently deployed—raising three children through the multiple deployments and moves has been a series of adjustments.

Her husband has been on active duty for 20 years. Their children are now 15, 12 and 8. During the early deployments, they got by on maybe one phone call a week. But now, they can chat more regularly, by phone,

## General Tips for Communicating with Children of All Ages

Parents need to communicate with children in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Timing and what is being shared are important factors. At home, parents also help their children communicate with the deployed parent in age appropriate ways. Here are some simple explanations of what children can grasp at certain ages.

### Three to four year olds

No concept of time. A three year old thinks that three months is next week. Parents need to use markers, such as, "Dad or mom will be home right before your birthday or before this holiday."

### Early elementary school

Better understanding of time. They understand that three months is a long time. Calendars are helpful. You can mark the calendar and say, "This is the day that Dad or mom is supposed to come home."

### Seven and eight year olds

Understand time and bigger concepts. They will be able to look at calendar and mark it. You can say, "This is the day dad or mom is supposed to come home." This age group understands concepts like good and bad. You can say dad or mom is going away to take care of the bad guys or bad things.

### Nine, ten, eleven and twelve year olds

Abstract thinking has begun. They are aware of the news and can understand concepts like the "national good." You can put out a return date, and they will understand the timeframe. Reinforce this age group's skills by providing them with pre-stamped envelopes, as well as private email accounts for communicating.

### Older adolescents

Challenging age group. This is an emotional period of time under the best of circumstances. It is an age when children need to identify with their same sex parent. If that parent is deployed, it is especially difficult for the child.

*Courage to Care is a health promotion campaign of Uniformed Services University. Its purpose is two-fold: to provide quality health information reflecting our University's excellence in military medicine and to present it in a friendly, appealing format for immediate distribution for the health promotion needs in your community. ●*

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# Communication with Children about Deployments

- Be careful about sharing your emotions with children. Some parents share too much (losing control in front of kids) or share too little (no emotion or giving the message that you can't talk about it). Children take their cues from you.
- Keep up the routine. Activities, such as games, schooling, bed times, are important to keep regular. Continue to celebrate birthdays or other special occasions with enthusiasm.
- Have your spouse before or while deploying record chapter books on a cassette recorder to be played back to young children. This helps with separation and attachment issues. Likewise, help your children create scrapbooks, video or journals to send or share upon return.
- Listen to your children and their concerns. Children may think a lot and have worries/concerns about their parents that are difficult to express. Be available when they are ready to communicate.
- Limit television and other media coverage of the war to help reduce anxiety and worries.
- Take care of yourself! Find time to rest, see a movie or do something just for you. Accept help from family or friends if feeling overwhelmed or in need of time out. We are all more vulnerable to stress when we are tired, and can manage better when we are rested and in tune with ourselves.
- Seek professional help from your military or civilian community in the event of special circumstances such as serious injury or death of loved ones. Help is available from people who are experienced in such matters and care.

## A few useful websites as resources for children and deployment:

### **Deploymentkids.com**

[www.deploymentkids.com](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

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email or Skype. They also write letters and send care packages.

At their school, the younger kids have a deployment club in which the kids get together with the guidance counselor and together they make care packages and goodies for their deployed parents. "They can all talk to each other and know they're not alone," said Judy.

## Friends here and there

"I have family and friends who take care of me here. My daddy has friends who help take care of him there," the book continues. "I think about my daddy here. My daddy thinks about me there. My daddy would like to be here with me. But he has very important work he must do there."

For Samantha and Cailin, one of their favorite things to do was send care packages. The spent a lot of time in the dollar bins at Target finding random and silly things to send. They also made a CD for each package and decorated each box. Samantha made a Father's Day disc of sappy father-daughter songs and Cailin drew lots of pictures.

She made a Cailin Bear when Samantha took her to Build-A-Bear and made a pink bear with a purple dress, heels, purse and necklace. The bear also had a voice recording of Cailin saying, "I love you Daddy." He brought the bear back with him and it sits with Daddy Bear on Cailin's dresser.

Sesame Street created the "Talk, Listen, Connect," kit for military families dealing with deployments. It includes information on deployments, homecomings and changes as well as a DVD and interactive activities for kids.

Military family life consultants in Alabama share these materials, along with the *Over There* book and other resources with families of the Alabama National Guard. The resources are also distributed and used by the consultants and other family support professionals nationwide.

At the Alabama National Guard and the Alabama Air Guard, the family readiness office collects photos of deploying members and puts them on pillowcases that they have ready for the families on deployment day.

"I love my daddy," the book concludes. "My daddy loves me here, there and everywhere." ●

Jenn Rowell is a freelance writer who grew up in the Air Force and has written about military issues for the Free Lance-Star, the Montgomery Advertiser and KMI Media Group.