

understanding the cycle of military deployment

How it affects young children and families

by Rachel Robertson

The statistics of children and families experiencing military life and affected by deployment are astounding. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2005):

- Over 1.4 million are serving in our military and over 800,000 are in the National Guard or are Reservists.
- Many of them have families and children, leading to over 2.5 million children under 18, nearly 500,000 under age 3.
- Currently, over 350,000 of our military are deployed at any given time. This experience changes and disrupts the lives of most affected children.

And this doesn't even take into consideration the children who have an uncle, aunt, brother, or other family member serving in the military. Many of these children live near a military duty station, but others live far from other military families. As caregivers and



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teachers of young children, we share a common goal of providing safe, nurturing, learning environments for children. We ensure this by continually educating ourselves about the needs of children and best practices for development and learning. Understanding military deployment and children's behaviors and needs during this time is no different. We must learn what these families and children are experiencing and how we can support them so we can continue to meet all of their needs and support their positive growth and development as they are challenged by this experience.

The cycle of deployment

According to the U.S. Army (n.d.), the cycle of deployment can be broken down into five stages. Of course, not everyone experiences the same emotions or has the same needs. However, there are some common feelings and behaviors that often occur at each stage. Knowing and preparing for these normal feelings

and behaviors allows caregivers and teachers to be more effective and supportive of children and families.

Stage one: Pre-deployment

Pre-deployment is the time after the family knows the deployment is scheduled but before the actual deployment occurs. This stage can be long, sometimes lasting for months, or it could be short, occasionally occurring in 24-48 hours.

Characteristics:

- Typically, family members alternate between denial and anticipation. If this stage is lengthy, parents may elect not to tell the children until closer to the actual deployment. This may alleviate some stress for the children, but only if parents are mindful of keeping their own emotions at bay when children are present. Otherwise, children feel the increased stress, but have no understanding of its cause. This can be more damaging than honest communication.

This is the second article written by Rachel Robertson for Exchange about Military Deployment. Her first article "Supporting Children and Families Throughout Military Deployment" appeared in our November/December 2007 issue of Exchange. Please visit www.ChildCareExchange.com to see our Articles Online.

- As the military person prepares for deployment, his or her schedule may change, causing early changes in routine and stress as the family tries to spend more time together, but is unable to do so. Tension may occur if feelings are not discussed.
- Depending on the deployment location, family members and the military person may have fears they might or might not be able to articulate or be willing to express.
- Families often work hard to spend time together, and feel increased pressure to all get along, be on their best behavior, and have the best time ever. Without the benefit of time, they feel pressured to make memories that can last them for months, years, or forever.
- At the same time family members begin to emotionally and physically detach as they prepare to separate. Often this is an unconscious self-preservation instinct.

Children's Needs:

- Children need reassurance whether they are directly asking for it or not.
- Open communication and adults who will listen are critical. Frequently, the unknown is much scarier than the known and adults often make the mistake of keeping information from children to protect them when what they are doing actually heightens their fears.
- Too much information is also harmful. The best approach is to let children know you are there to listen and are willing to answer their questions.
- Giving children information about timelines, even if it is scarce, is helpful.
- Allowing children to participate in the preparations gives them a sense of purpose and control during a time that often causes people to feel out of control. Making photo albums, picture frames, lists, or even matching socks to pack are good activities for young children.

Stage two: Deployment

This is the first month of the actual deployment. Family members often 'crash' during this stage of deployment. They worked hard to be positive and prepare for the deployment and the reality hits them now.

Characteristics:

- The parent or guardian at home is stressed and has less ability to comfort the children effectively.
- Family members often report feeling overwhelmed, worried, sad, lonely, helpless, and lost. Each day begins with a realization that this is the beginning of a long and stressful experience.
- Families who have had a long pre-deployment stage often feel a sense of relief to have finally started this deployment. While this relief is welcome, it can be coupled with guilt.
- As with all stressful situations, this deployment stage is accompanied by many stress-related behaviors like sleeplessness, anxiety, short tempers, acting out in anger, and lack of focus or drive.
- Many families are establishing communication systems and have not typically established new routines.

Children's Needs:

- Children, now more than ever, need to feel a sense of security and predictability. A part of their world has changed drastically and it is important that other parts do not.
- They need reassurance that a lack of presence does not equal a lack of love (for the service member).
- They also need people to support their parent at home so they aren't affected unduly by that parent's stress.

Stage three: Sustainment

This is the middle of the deployment. This time varies based on the length of

the deployment. At this point, families are beginning to feel more positive. While specific events and situations can continue to cause fear, worry, and anxiety, family members are beginning to adapt to their new routine, have established communication with their military person, have inevitably surmounted a few hurdles like a broken toilet or snowstorm, and have become more confident in their ability to get through the deployment experience.

Family members have usually developed or found support systems, have developed new routines, and have found sources of information to keep them informed of their military person's situation. However, if family members have not done these things successfully, the stress of deployment is heightened and can lead to impulsive behaviors, acting out, or depression.

Children's Needs:

- Children continue to need routine and predictability.
- They need flexible caregivers who understand that their moods and needs might change daily.
- Communication with their deployed parent is essential. Caregivers can help develop creative ways to do this.
- Any opportunities to contribute positively — like learning about another culture, writing to soldiers, or donating — help children learn from their experience and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Stage four: Re-deployment

This is the last phase of deployment; it represents the time after a date, or estimated date, for return home that has been set.

- Families often feel the same stress and anxiety they felt in the deployment phase.
- Mixed emotions are the norm. Families are excited to reunite and are worried at the same time.

- Often, the date of homecoming changes which causes frustration.
- Family members are usually in a rush trying to get things accomplished before their service member comes home.
- They may be concerned or worried about changes that have occurred or decisions that were made without the service member.

The intensity of this phase is dependent on the quantity and quality of communication throughout the separation.

Children's Needs:

It is difficult to maintain a high level of emotion, whether positive or negative, on a consistent basis.

- Children may act out or keep to themselves if this stage lasts very long.
- Most children are so focused on the excitement of the upcoming reunion that it sometimes becomes hard to express any other feelings. This may affect behavior as well.
- Children need adults to help them pace their emotions during this time.
- They need opportunities to express all of their feelings, both positive and negative.
- Finally, children need the adults in their lives to remain consistent and manage their own emotions while with them.

Stage five: Post-deployment/reunion

This stage represents the period of three to six months after the service member returns home. Depending on the service member's schedule, this stage may overlap with another pre-deployment phase.

Family members often experience many emotions during this time. At first they are often overwhelmed with relief that the deployment is over and tend to cling to one another. Then, they typically expect to get back to 'normal' soon after. This is rarely the case. Everyone has been through an intense, yet different, experience and has changed. This requires a 'getting to know each other' period.

For longer deployments, this phase can take many months. Many chaplains are recommending families take a 'day for a day' approach, allowing an equal amount of time for reestablishing the family routine as elapsed during the deployment. Even if nothing else has changed, the children have surely changed as they have grown. "Children have become older and more competent and they have come to rely on the remaining parent for things the deployed parent used to do" (Levin & Daynard, 2005). This often causes feelings of disappointment and resentment.

The service member is often experiencing 'culture shock' and may need time to reengage in family life. This can be hard for children to understand.

Children's Needs:

- Children have been waiting a long time for this reunion and are excited.
- They have been saving many things to share with their deployed parent. They are eager for their time and don't want to share.
- They need a lot of attention from the newly returned parent.
- Children need this time to reconnect with the deployed parent and to know they were missed. It is often beneficial if the service member can

take a short time off to spend with their child. It is also important to keep routines and behavior expectations consistent during this time as much as possible.

- Each child in the family needs his or her own individual opportunities to reconnect with the deployed parent as well as opportunities to participate in whole family activities.

Understanding each of these stages and the accompanying emotions, behaviors, and needs of children is important. Using a variety of approaches and activities to respond to children throughout the deployment process is essential.

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