

# Ideas for Helping Children Cope with Deployment

*Keep in mind that these suggestions are for a variety of ages and stages – you know your child best.*

## Pre-Deployment

- Talk to teachers at daycare and/or school to let them know parent is leaving.
- (If you want a copy of information about the effects of deployment on children for them, please let me know)
- Tape record or videotape the 'leaving' parent –
  - ◆ Reading a bedtime story
  - ◆ Giving a birthday wish
  - ◆ Giving a holiday wish
  - ◆ Congratulating child/ren on good report cards, ballet recitals, soccer games, etc.
  - ◆ Just to say "I love you"
  - ◆ Could have 1 per week (or what ever works for you) reinforcing "I love you, I miss you, I wish I could see you" – or any other message that your child may need to hear
- Take a picture of 'leaving' parent (alone or with child or whole family) to put:
  - ◆ Beside their bed
  - ◆ In their locker at school
  - ◆ In their 'cubby' at daycare
  - ◆ In the eating area, or an area where you all sit down to talk
- Make a picture book with photos of 'leaving' parent doing routine things with child/family.
- Trace every family member's handprint (for each person) so when you feel lonely you can put your hand on top of it.
- Have child make something special for 'leaving' parent to take with them.
- Give child something special of 'leaving' parent's to keep while they're gone.
- Give child a t-shirt of 'leaving' parent's (maybe even 'gently worn') to wear at bedtime or just to cuddle with.
- 'Leaving' parent can write out cards ahead of time for special occasions they will not be present for (even purchase the gifts before you go) so that child gets it on the special day.
- Set up an e-mail account for each child (hotmail, yahoo, etc.) so they can send and receive messages to/from the 'leaving' parent.
- Purchase (an inexpensive) or get access to a scanner so you can send report cards, pictures, etc. that are up-to-date. Exciting for children to send these special things, and gratifying for the parent to receive them.
- Purchase (an inexpensive) digital or regular camera for leaving parent to use while they are away. Digital cameras mean you can send pictures via e-mail, rather than having to process and send regular photographs (not always an option on deployments).

## During Deployment:

*From Home with remaining parent or caregiver:*

Keep the line of communication open, just because the parent isn't there doesn't mean that you don't talk about them. Kids are thinking and feeling things about that parent that shouldn't be buried. Give them opportunities to talk.

Let children 'own' their feelings. (It's okay for them to be sad or angry that Mom is away. It's what they do about it that needs to be appropriate.) Be aware that children who appear to have it 'all together' may still be experiencing difficulty underneath. Ask questions that may open up feelings that are being repressed.

Remember to take a deep breath. Children may regress. Getting angry about their physiological or psychological responses won't help the situation. Be matter-of-fact about things like bed-wetting.

Have letter writing sessions together, this could help open up dialogue to talk about their feelings. Be honest about your own feelings. ("Yes, I'm sad that Dad is away, but I know he'll be back and I'm looking forward to that"). Show your own positive ways and attitude of dealing with the situation. Your own coping skills are very important – children learn what they live.

Have your child make a diary or scrapbook while parent is gone. It could be for themselves or for their deployed parent when they return and could include:

- ◆ Photographs
- ◆ Pictures the children have made
- ◆ Arts/crafts
- ◆ Letters/e-mails written to parent
- ◆ Letters/e-mails received from parent
- ◆ Photographs of parent in their deployment location
- ◆ Invitations from birthdays that they've gone to
- ◆ Daily or weekly journaling of their activities

Touch base with your child's teachers (school or preschool) on a regular basis to see how they're coping at school/daycare AND to let the teachers know how your child is coping at home.

Keep your family routine pretty much the same as usual, especially if the children are involved in activities. Things should not come to a grinding halt with one parent gone. That could foster hostile feelings towards the deployed parent, and would also make more time available to be sad or lonely. Continuity is extremely comforting to children.

Make up something special to do that is just for when the parent is deployed (one family has movie night on Friday night – they order pizza, put on their jammies and watch a movie together)

Keep busy, but not too busy. Children need to have 'down time' – their emotional health is dependent on their physical health.

*From Deployed Parent:*

Send pictures of yourself where you're staying (with your regular or digital camera)

- ◆ What your room looks like
- ◆ The place that you work/learn in
- ◆ The surrounding 'landscape' (if possible)
- ◆ Where you eat your meals
- ◆ Who you work/learn with
- ◆ What you do in your spare time (study, sightseeing, etc)

Write letters or e-mails as often as possible.

Reassure your child that you miss them and that you wish you were with them.

Allow them to own their feelings. (it's okay to be sad or angry)

Share your feelings with them.



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