# Deployed Dads

## Preparing Children to Cope with Separation

Those who choose a career in the military understand they will face challenges and make sacrifices. As the number of parents in the military has grown dramatically since the 1970s, these challenges and sacrifices often involve children who experience separation from their military parents on a regular basis.

Throughout American history, children have had to deal with physical separation from their military fathers. Almost all children find separation from their fathers stressful. But not all children feel and respond the same way. Children of different ages may experience separation differently too. Helping your children adapt to changes before, during, and after deployment starts with you.

According to an old proverb, “The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war.” In a military context, this proverb highlights the importance of building physical, mental, and emotional readiness long before it is necessary in battle. The same holds true for preparing your children for your deployment. The more you nurture your emotional bond with your children, the better prepared they will be for a physical separation from you. The quality of your relationship with your children now can influence how they respond to the uncertainties surrounding your deployment.

**The strength of your relationship with your children depends on many factors; for example, how close you feel to them; how approachable you are when they are hurt or have problems; how involved you are with them at home, in school, or through activities; how well you know their friends (real or imaginary); how affectionate you are with them; how well and often you communicate with them; and how well you understand and respond to their fears. How you relate emotionally to your children plays a major part in the nature of your relationship with them.**

But many fathers have difficulty showing their emotions. Dads in the military can face even more challenges for expressing their feelings with family. The skills you need to perform your day-to-day responsibilities well in the military can be direct opposites of the skills you need to keep a good relationship with your children.

In the military environment, you are expected to respect and obey without question those in **authority**. You have **accountability** for following orders and must accept full responsibility for completing assignments. As you steer successfully through authority and accountability requirements, you receive **affirmation** through promotions and other recognition for a job well done. **Acceptance** within your unit and the broader military community follows.

The process tends to work in reverse when it comes to drawing your children closer to you. First, children need to know your **acceptance** of them is unconditional. Even if they make mistakes, they want to know you will continue to love them in spite of their failures. You prove your acceptance by **affirmation** through consistent encouragement and praise. You can reinforce this through showing affection, physical touch, and spending time with them. Acceptance and affirmation build and strengthen your relationship with your children. When your children feel emotionally connected with you, they are more willing to have **accountability** for their behavior. Rules without relationships often produce rebellion. Obeying your rules and meeting your expectations are more likely when children respect your loving **authority** and feel unconditionally loved and accepted by you.

Being a loving father who expresses his emotions consistently to his children at home can be difficult to balance with the expectations and demands of military culture. However, creating a home environment now that is accepting, affirming, accountable, and under loving authority is the best way to prepare your children for your deployment.

If communication and the emotional bond between you and your children are solid and growing, you can maintain the connection in a way that does not feel awkward or forced, even during your deployment. Start now by following several simple steps:

**Make yourself available.** Your absence could make your children feel like other things in your life have priority. Just by spending time with your children now, you can reassure them that they are important to you, even when you are away.

**Show your affection.** A touch, a hug, or a few comforting words will make your children feel loved. Make these gestures part of your daily life at home.

**Be involved.** Even if you have to cancel or give up some of your own activities, make time to be involved in your children's lives. Whether you participate in school activities, attend sports events, or just play a board game together, interacting with your children and taking an interest in ***their*** interests will bring you closer.

**Accept your children for who they are.** Your children should understand that no matter what mistakes they make or failures they have, they always will be loved by you. Teenagers, in particular, need to know that although you might not always approve of their behavior, you accept them as individuals. In fact, when teenagers feel accepted by their fathers, they are more likely to be open and trusting in their communication with them.

**Be consistent.** Young children and teens thrive on consistency in their lives. They feel more secure when they know what to expect from you. Keep your fathering habits steady. Dependable fathering behavior should be your goal even if it is difficult to maintain and you have to put in extra effort.

Among the resources that are available to help you build and strengthen your emotional bond with your children, two are particularly helpful for military fathers who might be facing deployment. *The Five Love Languages of Children* by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell describes the five ways children give and receive love and explains how you can discover your children's unique communication styles so you can better meet their emotional needs. From quality time to physical touch, the five love languages help you connect with your children, making every minute and word count. *The Language of Love: How to Be Instantly Understood by Those You Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent presents effective techniques to help you express your love to your children in a variety of ways, such as in letters, e-mail, and telephone calls, even when you are deployed.

Every branch of the Armed Services offers information and tools to help children cope and families stay connected during deployment. Explore these resources for more details:

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| **Military OneSource:** | **www.militaryonesource.com** |
| **U.S. Navy LIFELines:** | **www.lifelines.navy.mil** |
| **MilitaryHOMEFRONT:** | **www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil** |
| **Army Integrated Family Support Network:** | **www.myarmylifetoo.com** |
| **Marine Corps Community Services:** | **www.usmc-mccs.org** |
| **U.S. Air Force Crossroads:** | **www.afcrossroads.com** |
| **U. S. Coast Guard Health & Safety Directorate:** | **www.uscg.mil/hq/g-w/g-wk/wkw** |
| **Reserve Affairs:** | **www.defenselink.mil/ra** |
| **National Guard Family:** | **www.guardfamily.org** |
| **Military Spouse Resource Center:** | **www.milspouse.org** |

Relationships with your children require constant attention. But the time and effort it takes to build and maintain strong, loving relationships will be worthwhile because the kind of father you are today can ease the effects of future physical and emotional separation.

# Take Time to Be a Dad Today

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Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

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