

## **Coping with Deployment**

Waiting for a loved one to deploy is hard on children as well as spouses. Children may not understand why a parent must leave and may fear the parent is leaving forever. Because children are not very good at expressing their worries verbally, they tend to express them behaviourally. Be sure your children have many chances to express how they are feeling. The following ideas may help your family prepare for and get through a period of separation due to deployment:

### **Getting ready**

- Use your own words to help children find theirs. For example, “I don’t want Daddy to leave, and waiting for him to leave makes me feel sort of sad and worried. Do you ever feel that way?”
- Explain that although many things will be different, many things will be the same.
- If the child plays imaginary games with dolls or animals, try to introduce the idea of one member of the doll family leaving. Let the other dolls say how they feel about this. Use a map or a globe to show where his or her parent will be.
- Use a calendar to show children when the deployment will take place, as they may not understand how long three weeks is.
- Be sure that the departing parent has time with each child before deploying. Hug often. Take photos of each child with the departing parent.
- The departing parent might schedule a trip to the child’s school to meet with the teacher. The point of this trip is to be sure the teacher knows about the change in the family dynamics. Let the child show you around his or her school world and perhaps hear you tell the teacher how proud you are of him or her. You will be able to ask better questions about your child’s day if you are familiar with his or her school.
- Have a family meeting about ways to keep in touch during the deployment. Letters, pictures, tapes, and moves are all good ways to stay connected.

### **During the deployment**

- Remember to occasionally send children their own letters. Children enjoy few things more than receiving their own mail! A letter to the family pet will also bring a smile to a child’s face.
- Find the best way for the child to mark the end of the deployment. This may be making Xs on the calendar or ripping links off a paper chain.
- Remember that just because a child doesn’t express his or her feelings, it doesn’t mean they are not troubled. If a child is acting out, it may be the result of unexpressed emotions. Help the child name these feelings.
- It is fine and even healthy for children to see you have sad feelings too, but if you are really about to fall apart, try to do this away from your kids. Strong emotions in a parent can be scary to a child.
- Remind children that they are still safe, and that a deployed parent is still a member of the family.

- Do not minimize the child's grief. To a child it may feel like a parent is lost forever. Grief without understanding is difficult to work through.

## **Help is Available**

If you or your children are having a particularly difficult time adjusting to the deployment, support is readily available through several sources. Call the Military Family Resource Centre. Through the Member Assistance Program can directly access short term counseling and referral services. Another source of support may be a chaplain. The parent at home has a heavy load to carry. As a parent of a child with special needs, things can be difficult enough when both parents are available, but now it may seem overwhelming. Taking care of yourself has never been more important. Do not hesitate to contact your local MFRC staff to ask about options for respite care. The entire family will benefit if the parent at home has the chance to recharge his or her batteries.

## **Coming Home**

When the deployed parent returns, children may feel worried and stressed, as well as happy and excited. Depending on the child's developmental level, he or she may feel uncomfortable around the returning parent; almost as if they were strangers. Remind your returning spouse of this and help him or her understand that the child's behavior is a reaction to change, and not a rejection of the returning parent.

Make sure children have time to let their excitement out with the returned parent before having quiet time with your spouse. However, once the excitement has subsided, do schedule time to reconnect. Maintaining a strong marriage is one of the best things parents can do for their children.

Adapted from a resource by [MilitaryHOMEFRONT](#).