

Relatives Raising Children When a Parent Is Deployed

Overview

Preparing your relative to care for your child while you are deployed.

- Preparing for a sudden deployment
- Preparing your relative
- Making the transition a smooth one

As a single parent or a partner of a fellow service member, you have probably already completed a Family Care Plan. While this is an essential document for deployment readiness, it is just one step toward preparing your children and their caregivers for your separation. Your deployment may mean that your children will change schools, move far from friends, and have to give up favorite after-school activities. Your relatives may have mixed feelings about taking in your children, especially if your relatives are older with their child-rearing years far behind them. By thinking through all the ways your absence will affect your children and their caregivers, you can work together to make this period a good experience for everyone.

Preparing for a sudden deployment

The prospect of deploying on a moment's notice is a very real one. Plan ahead as much as possible so when you leave you, your relatives, and your child will be confident that everything is in order.

- *Choose an interim caregiver.* You may not have enough time after receiving your orders to bring your child to your relative or to wait for the relative to arrive at your home. Ask a trusted neighbor or close friend to fill in until your relative can take over. This person may even need to escort your child to your relative's home. Be sure to name the interim caregiver in your Family Care Plan and include a special power of attorney in the event your child needs medical attention while under his or her care.
- *Keep enough money in your savings to pay for travel expenses.* With little time to make travel arrangements, you may pay a premium for fare to a relative's home or for your relative to travel to your home, especially if he or she will be traveling by air. Put aside enough money to cover expenses related to your child's and/or relative's travel.
- *Prearrange for your child's financial needs.* Figure out how much money your relative will need to care for your child during your deployment. Work with your pay clerk at your local finance office or use the myPay online service (<https://mypay.dfas.mil/mypay.aspx>) to set up an allotment or direct deposit to your relative's account. You can activate this upon your deployment.
- *Have an information sheet and all documentation together to give to your relative upon your deployment.* This should include:
 - Power of attorney for your child's caregiver

- Copies of your child's medical and dental plan cards, if not enrolled in TRICARE
- Your child's identification (ID) card (if your child is age 10 or older)
- A letter addressed to the local installation commander requesting access for your child's caregiver, if they will be living near a base
- Instructions for your relative on how to use installation services -- such as the child care program, commissary and exchange, recreation facilities, and medical treatment facilities -- on behalf of your child
- Contact information for your child's child care program, school, teachers, and any lessons they may attend
- Contact information for your child's pediatrician and dentist, as well as the dates and types of your child's last immunizations and the dates when your child is due for routine checkups
- A list of medications with instructions on how to administer and refill prescriptions
- A list of any special conditions or needs, such as allergic reactions, dietary restrictions, or fears
- A schedule of your child's weekly activities
- Your command point of contact during your deployment

Preparing your relative

When a grandparent, aunt, or uncle takes on the role of parent, there will be a period of adjustment for everyone. You can help prepare your child and your relative for their time together by alerting your relative to the following:

- *Be aware that the relationship between relative and child will change.* Your relative will need to set limits, impose discipline, and take other steps to keep your child safe, healthy, and thriving. This may be difficult at first for both your relative and your child to accept, especially if they are accustomed to seeing each other only on short visits. Provide a list of your child's activities, routines, likes and dislikes, and other important people in your child's life to communicate with and provide continuity for your child in your absence. Your relative can use this information to help ease some of the stress caused by the changes.
- *Let your relative know that behavior changes are normal for children as they adjust to their new circumstances.* Children may worry about what will happen to you and them and be worried something bad will happen to their relative, especially if the relative is elderly. Children 5 years old and younger may become clingy and fearful. They may also return to old behaviors and habits, such as thumb-sucking. Children 6 to 12 years old may act out at home or school, have trouble paying attention, or have trouble sleeping. Adolescents may become depressed or angry, and may have difficulties in school. If these behaviors

don't go away over time, your relative may want to seek help from family services on the installation, a social services agency in their community, your military chaplain, or a OneSource consultant.

- *Find ways to make the environment child friendly.* Depending on your child's age, your relatives may need to childproof their home, provide a safe place for your child to play, or provide a quiet place for your child to study.
- *Ask your relative to tell teachers and other adults in your child's life about your deployment and your child's new living arrangement.* Teachers, caregivers, coaches, school administrators, and religious leaders should be aware of what your child is going through so they can be on the lookout for behavior issues and provide the extra support your child needs to get through this time.
- *Establish routines.* All children need routines that let them know what's expected of them, including regular times for eating, sleeping, and homework. These provide a sense of security that can be especially important when a parent is deployed.
- *Treat all household members equally.* Your relatives may have children of their own at home who may at times resent yours, especially if they feel your child is getting special attention. Ask your relatives to hold your child to the same household rules as the rest of the family. If the other children have regular chores, your child should be assigned chores as well.

Making the transition a smooth one

A parent's absence is never easy, but there are things you can do to make the transition less stressful for everyone.

- *Arrange to have your relative move into your home, if possible.* Your deployment will be easier for your child if he or she doesn't have to move away. Younger children will be comforted by familiar surroundings while older ones won't have to leave their school, activities, and friends. A relative who is not a member of the military may move into base housing if the purpose is to care for your child during deployment.
- *Be sure to give your family member power of attorney.* As the substitute parent, your relative will need your permission to authorize routine and emergency medical care for your child, to enroll your child in school or child care, and to sign him or her up for sports and after-school activities, among other things. Specify exactly what you want the power of attorney to cover. Your base legal services office can help you with this.
- *Make sure your relatives will be allowed on the installation.* As your child's caregiver, your relative is eligible to receive services on your child's behalf at any military installation, not just your duty station. There may be times when your relative will need to bring your child to a military treatment facility,

dentist, or other base service. Your relative is also entitled to shop at the commissary and exchange as long as he or she is caring for your child. To use base services, your relative needs to show your child's military ID or have special authorization from your local base commander. Contact the military personnel center to learn how to obtain a letter of permission to use base services.

- *Connect your relative with your unit's volunteer family support group, ombudsman, or key volunteer.* If your relatives live near your installation, the family assistance/support network will allow them to meet other people in the same situation. These groups might have holiday parties, potluck dinners, and other recreational opportunities. Even if your relative and child are not living near your installation, the support groups will allow them to share information and feel connected to you and your unit.
- *Arrange a line of communication with your relative.* Set up a regular time for phone calls (and e-mails, if possible) and let your relative know how to reach you when he or she needs information or if your child wants to share with you something that happened in school or at home. Check with your local family assistance/support center for information on phone cards and morale calls.
- *If your child will be enrolling in a new school or child care program, find out about admission requirements beforehand.* You may find out that your child needs proof of a certain immunization or has to pass a particular course to be eligible for the next grade. Also, be aware that if your child moves to a new city or county, you may be asked to pay nonresident tuition to the public school system. You can probably have this waived if you explain your situation beforehand.
- *If your child receives special services, look for a similar program in the new location.* A move could mean a disruption in services your child receives, such as a special Individual Education Program (IEP). Research what is available in the location your child will be moving to and call ahead to make sure your child will continue with the same level of services. If your child is enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member program, ask staff whether your child will be able to receive the same services in the new location.
- *If you have a high school student, make sure your child won't miss any courses required for graduation.* If your child enrolls temporarily in a high school in a different state, he or she may miss out on courses that are required for graduation, such as state history in sophomore or junior year. Talk to the school administration about your circumstances and ask whether they will accept credit for similar courses in your child's temporary school.

While it is never easy for families to be apart for an extended period, by planning ahead and anticipating the obstacles your relative and child may

encounter during your absence, you can help to make this time less stressful for your child, your child's caregiver, and yourself.

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