

Single Parenting While Your Spouse Is Deployed

Overview

How to adjust to life as a single parent while your spouse is deployed.

- Preparing for what's ahead
- Adjusting emotionally
- Helping your child adjust
- Ways to make the adjustment easier for you
- Resources

While your spouse is deployed and you are home with the children, there may be times when you feel like a single parent. Although the situation is temporary, there are emotional, financial, and practical day-to-day adjustments you will need to make as you cope with this transition. Even if you have friends and relatives nearby, you're likely to experience some struggles while your spouse is away. How can you calm your children's fears about their parent when you are worried, too? Where will you turn when you need help? How will you find emotional support and provide your child with emotional support? The information below will help you adjust to life as a temporarily single parent.

Preparing for what's ahead

Adjusting to life while your spouse is deployed should go more smoothly if you take some time beforehand to think through and discuss some of the issues you may face. Try to anticipate what might happen and put systems in place to make it easier.

- *Communication.* Discuss how you will communicate with one another, and how often. Talk about how your spouse will stay in touch with the children. It's comforting for children to know they are in their parent's thoughts, even when that parent is very far away. Keep in mind, however, that depending on where your spouse is deployed, he or she may not have dependable access to e-mail or to a telephone.
- *Legal.* Be sure you have a power of attorney before your spouse deploys. This will allow you to act on your spouse's behalf while he or she is away. Make sure your wills are up to date as well. Your installation's legal assistance office can help you do this.
- *Finances.* If your spouse takes care of the bills, have him or her go over the process with you. Set up joint checking and credit card accounts if you don't already have them in place. Ask your spouse to set up a "Restricted Access Pin" (RAPIN) so you can review the monthly Leave and Earnings Statement online.
- *Child care.* Arrange for dependable child care during hours when you are at work and your spouse would ordinarily be home with the children. If you live on or near a military installation, look into enrolling your child in a Department of Defense Child Development Program. Military child care centers are tax-subsidized and therefore usually less expensive than private child care. Fees are

2 • Single Parenting While Your Spouse Is Deployed

based on income. Care is available for children up to age 12. If there are no vacancies, ask your command's family support group or family support point of contact about other options in your area. Also, be sure to access the Web site of the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) at www.naccrra.org/militaryprograms for information about joint programs with the Department of Defense that can help subsidize child care expenses.

- *Plan strategies for handling everyday issues.* Figure out what you will do when you or your child is sick or you have to travel for work. Make a plan for backup child care and be sure your child knows and understands the plan.
- *Know whom to contact for emergencies.* Each military service has an emergency relief society to help with financial emergencies. Get in touch with the family center at your nearest military installation or contact your local American Red Cross office if you need help.

Adjusting emotionally

A spouse's deployment can bring out a range of strong emotions, and some of them may seem in direct conflict with each other. You may miss your spouse terribly, yet at the same time resent your spouse's freedom from family responsibilities. Be aware that all of your feelings are normal reactions to a difficult situation and there is support available for you and your family.

- *Seek out a support system.* Family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors who are willing to help with emergencies or offer a shoulder to lean on will help you feel less alone. Realize you may need help and that it's OK to ask for it.
- *Get involved with your installation's key volunteer or family readiness group.* You and your children will meet other people in the same situation and find ways to help each other. These groups might sponsor holiday parties, potluck dinners, and other recreational opportunities.
- *Get to know your neighbors.* Know at least three of your neighbors. You may need their help during an emergency and you'll always have somebody close by for day-to-day support.
- *Join a babysitting co-op or playgroup.* Check with your family or community support center on base, a local church or other house of worship, or a community recreational facility such as a YMCA to see what's available. A babysitting co-op where you take turns watching children can give you a few hours to yourself each week. A playgroup will be fun for your child and offer you a chance to meet other parents.
- *Take on only what you can handle.* It's OK to say no to extra work or obligations. Just remind yourself that you already have your hands full with your partner away

3 • Single Parenting While Your Spouse Is Deployed

and you won't be doing anyone any favors by taking on too much. If you pick up a new commitment, drop an old one.

- *Learn and practice techniques for stress management.* Whether it's a funny movie, a yoga class, a short walk, or a quiet cup of tea at the end of the day, learn how to better manage the stress in your life. Too much stress can have negative effects on your work and personal relationships as well as your health.

Helping your child adjust

Children may react to a parent's deployment as they would a divorce. They may worry about what will happen to them and be afraid that the parent at home will leave, too. Children 5 years of age 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, they may have trouble paying attention, and they may have trouble sleeping. Adolescents may become depressed or angry, and may have difficulties in school. Here are ways to help:

- *Keep to your pre-deployment routines as much as possible.* Children find comfort in routines, whether it means bedtime stories, a silly song in the morning, or watching a Friday night video with you.
- *Talk about the deployed parent.* Share as much information as appropriate about the parent's location and assignment. Answer your child's questions honestly and with patience, even if she has asked the same question more than once. Asking questions over and over is one way children come to terms with new situations.
- *Try to understand your child's fears.* If your child seems afraid, ask what is making him scared. If your child is afraid for your service member's safety, you can talk about all of the training members of the armed forces undergo to help them be safe. If your child is afraid for his own safety, offer comfort and remind him of all of the adults who are there to help keep him safe, such as police, firefighters, teachers, relatives, friends, and yourself.
- *Be consistent with discipline.* Your child may test you to see if you'll bend the rules with your spouse gone. You may be tempted to give in, but what your child needs now is not permissiveness, but a sense of stability. Let your child know that the family rules stay the same even while mom or dad is away.
- *Tell teachers and other adults in your child's life about the deployment.* Teachers, 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 changes and provide the extra support your child needs to get through this time.
- *Plan special outings or activities on days when your partner would usually be home.* Do something special on weekends, holidays, or other days your partner would have off. Even a simple picnic or art project can give children something to look forward to and keep their minds off a parent's absence.

4 • Single Parenting While Your Spouse Is Deployed

- *Let your child take on one of the absent parent's chores.* If they're old enough, let your children choose one of your spouse's usual chores, such as taking out the trash or sweeping up at night. This will help your kids feel they're contributing to the family while easing some of the burden on you.
- *Help your child communicate with the deployed parent.* Encourage your child to send letters, e-mails, drawings, photographs, report cards, videotapes, or cassette tapes.
- *Help your child express his or her feelings.* Give your child a special notebook or blank journal, markers, stamps, and other supplies to write down thoughts, make up stories, and create pictures of how he or she is feeling.

Ways to make the adjustment easier for you

Simplify your life as much as you can. You may feel you're short on one key ingredient -- time. Raising a child, working, and managing a household can be very hectic, but if you take steps to simplify your life, you may find it easier to cope. Here are some tips for simplifying your life:

- *Use a family calendar and write down appointments, birthdays, family and school events, and anything else that you need to remember or do.*
- *Get together with your child once a week and go over the upcoming schedule.* Talk about clothes, school lunches, practices, and anything else that's on your schedule.
- *Organize meal preparation.* If you can, try to cook meals that will have leftovers for lunch or another meal, or cook several meals at once and freeze them. Plan a week's worth of meals before you go grocery shopping to cut out last-minute trips to the store for ingredients. Keep things simple -- for example, by preparing a "breakfast" meal like scrambled eggs for dinner every now and then.
- *Learn ways to make the most of your time.* Buy birthday presents for your child's friends all at once. Do a major cleaning at home on a regular basis and let it go in between those times. Go grocery shopping every two weeks instead of once a week. Make a list of all your errands and do them all at once.

Don't forget to take care of yourself. If you get enough sleep and exercise and eat well, the adjustment to life with your partner away will be easier for you and your child.

Resources

Your installation's support services

Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center can provide you with information and support.

Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at *www.militaryonesource.com*.

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