

## Chapter 22

# Supporting Resilience in Military Families

The next time you say, “Thank you for your service,” to one of our men and women in uniform, please think about the family members who also serve our nation. Only a small portion of our populace chooses to serve, and their families deserve our gratitude for sharing the burden. This chapter is a tribute to the spouses and nearly 2 million children of service members. It is rooted in patriotism but is not political. Our service members do not create the policy of our country; they live it, as do their families. This chapter focuses on strategies parents and caregivers can use to maintain healthy connections and reinforce positive experiences even while facing the challenges that come with being connected to the military.

I invite you to read this chapter even if you have no direct military affiliation so that you are aware of the needs of military children, adolescents, and families. Odds are, though, that you know a military-connected child whose parent, brother, or sister is serving our all-volunteer forces or is a post-9/11 veteran. Ongoing conflicts have created a generation of military children whose parents have been repeatedly deployed (sent into action, usually overseas). These parents haven’t been able to share important parts of their sons and daughters’ childhood, missing developmental milestones and opportunities to offer guidance. Non-deployed spouses have needed to act largely as single parents. This is a resilient population that has by and large endured this with grace, but resilience does not mean invulnerability. The stresses on family life have been prolonged, and the families are tiring. We know they do better when communities and neighbors recognize their contribution, and your awareness will be an important step toward creating the supportive environment that contributes to their well-being. If you want to know how you can best help, the answer may be in supporting the families of those who serve.

You may benefit from gaining a better understanding of how these families are trying to remain connected whether or not you know a child directly affected. Many other

children also deal with separations, including children of divorce and others who deal with frequent moves. We can use the experience of the military-connected family to learn about values, strength, sacrifice, courage, resilience, sense of service, purpose, pride, and even the frailties of the American family. These children and families are not alone in needing to worry about the well-being of one or both parents who sacrifice to serve. In your own communities and within your own lives, consider first responders and other professionals who are regularly called to serve, such as police officers and firefighters. We tend to take them for granted instead of honoring their commitment and thinking about their families' special needs. We need to acknowledge the real heroes in our midst, rather than those who get attention because of money or athletic talent. When we recognize that heroes are those who offer service to society and their communities in one way or another, we build children with stronger character and a desire to contribute.

If you are a service member or spouse, remember that how you model resilience is more important than what you say about it. Your kids will learn how to problem-solve and manage stress by watching how you cope. They will learn from you that strong, capable people sometimes reach out to others for support. In uncertain times, they need to know that you can protect them, and you will be more capable of offering security when you are emotionally, physically, and spiritually healthy.

### **Why Many Military Families Are Models of Resilience**

Military families deal with challenges that many civilians can only begin to imagine. I don't want you to think, however, that you merit special attention because the choices you have made have hurt your children's healthy development or resilience. Let's start by recognizing what you are giving your children. Being military connected may build your children's ability to adapt to challenges far into the future. Let's look at the benefits your children are likely to gain before we even consider how to prepare your family to minimize the challenges.

First, whether a parent is on active duty, in the reserves, or part of the National Guard, your children are raised within a culture of service. The benefit to your children of being raised by parents who are mission focused and maintain a commitment to service is immeasurable.

Second, your children are being exposed to a diverse institution in which the importance of cohesion and performance takes precedence over division. There are untold benefits to your

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children of having friends and sharing experiences with peers from varied backgrounds and experiences who come from all over the country and perhaps the world. In a nation that is increasingly diverse and whose future is dependent on cooperation and communication, your children will be prepared.

Third, one of the greatest challenges of military life, frequent moves and school changes, can contribute to a sense of pride in one's adaptability. Children may learn to make friends quickly and introduce themselves and interact with many adults, including teachers. As a result, many of your children become confident in their social skills. It's important, however, that educational transitions occur as smoothly as possible and that relationships with important friends and caring adults are maintained.

Finally, many military families have a cultural connection that comes from a shared experience and common mission. Families who live on base often benefit from neighbors who care about each other, check in frequently, and have common concerns. It is a gift to raise a child in an authentic community. Our National Guard and reserve members, however, live throughout the nation, and even most active-duty families don't live on base. For these families in particular, it's important that the rest of us recognize and value their contribution and create a supportive community. Furthermore, families of veterans remain deeply affected by their experience and may no longer be as closely connected to a supportive military community.

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### **Connection: Core to the Well-being of Children and Adolescents**

All children need to feel safe, valued, and confident to develop to their potential. The vital connection to other people in their homes, schools, and communities supports their resilience. One way to visualize this is to imagine a child in the center of a series of protective circles, each layer surrounded by another; rings within rings, each offering security and appropriate challenges. The most important connection is to parents, but siblings and extended family form the next layer immediately beyond parents. Healthy friendships form the next ring and can offer a lifetime of support.

We know that children who feel connected to school are more likely to succeed there.

During the school year, teachers often spend more time in a day with children than parents do;

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they can be a profoundly important layer of support. Coaches can help build character and instill important traits like perseverance. Community forms the outermost layer and can blanket the entire family with support and protection. A wide array of community-based forces can make life richer and create the kind of opportunities that help children thrive. Spiritual centers can offer a sense of purpose and security. Recreational centers create spaces where kids can safely play, learn to be physically healthy, and express themselves through art or music programs. The advantage of having multiple layers of supportive connections is that if one layer is weakened, the others can compensate to ensure children's healthy development.

The military mission and its requirements can significantly affect each layer of connection. The core connection to at least one parent is challenged by the deployment cycle. (Please note that the word *deployment* will be used here to represent any prolonged separation associated with the military lifestyle.) The connection to the remaining parent is changed, largely because that parent has to function as a single parent during deployments. The relationship may become stronger, but the stress of single parenting can also create tension. Sibling connections can be altered because older siblings may take on some of the role of the deployed parent. Sibling relations often become stronger because as families move, brothers and sisters serve as built-in peers who understand what each is going through. Connections to grandparents and other extended family members may be tighter if they become more actively involved to compensate for the distant parent. On the other hand, it may be that the military family residing on or near a base is far from extended family. Even without deployments, the military lifestyle includes frequent moves, sometimes over great distances. Schools and friendships change more often than among civilians. This certainly creates challenges to maintaining a strong, secure connection to schools. The good news is that when children are engaged in a range of school and community activities, those connections can remain strong, and some community and cultural connections may be particularly strong and supportive when people share a common experience.

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## The Deployment Cycle as THE Challenge to Connections

Preparing psychologically and physically to deploy can take months, and relationships within families can be altered long before the actual time to say good-bye. Similarly, returning is a

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complex process; it is not just about walking through the door. Especially for parents who have been in combat, it may require significant resettling. It may involve processing trauma and readjusting to family life after being in a war zone. The effects and adjustments of deployment and separation on family life may last longer than the deployment itself.

Military services are sensitive to the stress deployment takes on families, and attention is paid to ease the transitions associated with deployment, separation, and reintegration (returning home). Your best resources are military resources such as family readiness and support groups and the professionals who devote considerable effort toward providing military family services. Remember, strong people seek help, and they use those circles of support *and* the extensive tools and resources available to them.

As you think about your family thriving through these times, your goal has to be to maintain a continual connection despite the disruptions to that connection. This may sound unrealistic, given the likelihood that the service member may be living thousands of miles away. There is no way to have this ongoing continual connection feel natural or seamless. Although the goal may feel elusive, you can take steps to maintain the best connections given the circumstances. Adopt a mind-set that prepares for the reality of separation but plans for connection.

Let's first consider how to maintain positive connection with siblings, extended family, schools, and friends even in the setting of school moves, separations from a parent, and the significant family adjustments associated with deployment. Then we'll focus on strengthening the most important connection—the one between parents and children. We will discuss how to remain close despite geographic distance and how to avoid pitfalls that may strain parent-child relationships.

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## Sibling Connections

There are few greater pleasures than watching your children care for and support each other. As your spouse deploys, the entire family needs to contribute to make sure the house functions as smoothly as possible and the burden does not fall entirely on the remaining spouse. Children can take on more age-appropriate chores, as long as they have time for schoolwork and play. Older siblings can take on more responsibility, caring for younger ones, babysitting, and getting

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younger siblings to different activities. This will benefit older children because anything that makes adolescents feel their contributions matter serves as a powerful reinforcement toward continuing positive behaviors.

Despite the necessity of having siblings care for one another, I caution you against having siblings take on a parenting role. It is common in stressed families and single-parent households (which yours is temporarily during deployment) for the oldest siblings to become “parentified.” Adolescents need to focus on school. They deserve to be teenagers, to have friends so they can develop social skills, and to have downtime so they can reflect on their place in the world.

When teens assume too much responsibility, they may consciously or subconsciously resent their missed childhood. This resentment may build up to anger that could turn on you. More likely, though, teens may fear disappointing you so much that they could lose the ability to express themselves freely to you. If authentic communication is damaged, that has major implications for your relationship. I also worry that parentified children may have role confusion when the deployed parent returns home. The last thing families need is for adolescents to feel demoted when parents return or to have resentment toward the returning parent because they’re losing a valued level of responsibility. In the worst-case scenario, parentified children may reject parental authority even more than usual for a developing adolescent. They may perceive that they were functioning as an equal adult or even parent and now resent monitoring and guidance. All siblings should play their role, and contributing to family function should be an important part of that role. But at the same time, make sure that kids get to stay kids. Their “job” is to grow, learn, and develop into healthy, productive adults.

Before we leave the discussion about siblings within your family, let’s take a moment to remember that many service members have siblings of their own who are still children and adolescents. They too need a supportive community and to stay connected with their deployed brother or sister.

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## Extended Family Connections

Frequent moves may have made it harder for your children to know their grandparents and other relatives. On the other hand, these family members may play a vital supportive role to your

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children during deployments and will have the opportunity to forge close lifelong relationships. If extended family will play a greater role in caring for your child during deployment than they did previously, keep 2 key things in mind to allow smoother transitions.

First, *plan*. Try to make transitions between caregivers go as smoothly as possible. For example, grandmother may arrive in advance of the deployment so she will represent continuity and be associated with the loving nature of your home. Beyond that, children will benefit by seeing that the temporary caregiver has genuine respect for the deployed parent. If she arrives the day of departure, she may be associated with confusion or be viewed as a replacement. No child will appreciate anyone replacing a parent, and that can breed unnecessary resentment. Also try to have the caregiver connect prior to deployment through visits, phone calls, or social media. If you will be relocating, try to visit prior to the move or, if that is not possible, use digital photos to familiarize your children with the new environment.

Next, *communicate*. Children need to know “who will take care of me” and that the adults around them are sensitive to their needs. Have a discussion with your children and the caregiver. The discussion should be targeted to the age of your children and should include the following key points:

- ❖ You have given a great deal of thought about who can best help to care for your children.
- ❖ Explain why this person was chosen. Ideally, you should be able to say that you have chosen someone who also loves your children.
- ❖ Reinforce that this is temporary and that the caregiver does not replace the deploying parent.
- ❖ The caregiver represents you and should be respected.
- ❖ Explain that the distant parent will always be thinking of the children and will stay in contact whenever possible but because of distance will be unable to give the daily attention the children deserve. Because you care so much for your children, you have carefully chosen someone who will do a good job of caring for those everyday needs.

You and your spouse should also discuss your parenting approach with the caregiver. Your children need consistency of care rather than different, new approaches. You should discuss parenting style and the blend of control and rules with warmth and support. Ideally we strive for a balance between rules and warmth, remembering that discipline means guidance, not control, but adults disagree about these things. Well-functioning households do the best they can to

disagree behind the scenes to present a united front to the children. When they don't, children learn to play parents off of each other. It's important that you discuss this openly in advance so children don't receive confusing messages. If the temporary caregiver understands your approach, hopefully she will remain as consistent as possible in maintaining that approach. Don't be surprised if your extended family member from a different generation holds a different parenting philosophy than you do. She may be more lenient or stricter. This is all the more reason to work this through openly in advance. This will hopefully prevent the returning service member from having to respond to a 7-year-old shouting, "Grandma never told us what to do."

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## Friendships

Everybody dreams of that best lifelong friend with whom you share a history of memories. This may not be a reality for military children. Many move frequently and have to make new friends, often having to try to break into long-standing friendship groups. For young children this may be as easy as an afternoon on the playground, but it may be difficult during adolescence when cliques run rampant and kids decide they are "normal" by arbitrarily deciding who is not. The good news is that most children navigate this successfully, and the skills military children develop in doing so may serve them well over a lifetime.

If your child goes to a school with a high proportion of other military children or other highly mobile children, he may adapt more quickly because the school's peer culture may be welcoming to newcomers. He is also more likely to join a circle of peers who expect to maintain distant friendships after a move. In general, long-distance relationships are easier to maintain now because we have a more mobile population and children are used to others entering their lives at different points and may enjoy having friends all over the country.

The new era of social networking may hold a great benefit for these kids. Real friendships in teen culture are largely built in the virtual world. Teens who live next door to each other sometimes prefer to talk by video chatting, texting, or social networking sites. Let me be clear—this is a mixed blessing at best, and I have serious concerns about the implications to communication and human relationships. Despite my misgivings, it is a reality now and its

benefit here is that the military child is closer to the mainstream when his friendships are largely virtual.

As your child moves into a new community, it's important that he has several entry points into the peer world. He will be more likely to find a suitable peer group if he has the opportunity to meet peers in a variety of different settings beyond school, including clubs, athletic activities, youth development programs, and spiritual centers. Another reason children need multiple peer groups is so they never feel completely isolated when friendships shift. This is particularly important during middle school when bullying, in-groups, and out-groups are unfortunately a way of life. If your child has 2 or 3 circles of friends as well as healthy in- and out-of-school activities, he will feel more secure. As one group of friends rejects him, he can hang out with another until he is likely re-welcomed into the first after a few days.

Even with efforts to build new friendships, you can expect that when your child is new to a community, he may initially be quite lonely. Plan events he can look forward to because filled calendars and activities help time to pass more quickly. Weekends and holidays may be especially challenging, so plan special outings for these times.

Your child needs to have some particularly important social skills as he attempts to enter existing peer groups. Because he will be eager to make new friends, he may be at risk of falling into a crowd that may negatively influence him. As an outsider to the community, some of the most welcoming kids may be other outsiders. These are often the most interesting kids with the best values. Sometimes, however, they are youth who have rejected adult values altogether. You can't choose your child's friends, but you can prepare him for this possibility. Encourage him to be friendly but not to dive into friendships until he has had time to observe. Prepare him to be observant rather than believe what he hears from the gossip mill. If he too quickly buys into the labels teens give other kids to "orient" new peers to the social landscape, he may close himself off to the best friendships.

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## School Connections

One of the greatest challenges for some military families is to ensure children receive a fine education despite frequent moves. Your involvement here is key. In general, children whose

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parents are involved in their education stay in school longer, do better academically, have fewer social issues, and are more likely to continue on to college. Imagine the message you send to your children about the value of education when it remains a priority to you as you move and especially when a deployed parent shows continued interest and involvement in your children's school activities even from a war zone.

It is beyond this book's scope to offer an in-depth discussion on smooth school transitions and I suggest you use available resources that are expert in this area. However, some general guidance on school moves follows:

- ❖ Preparing for the move may set the stage for success. Several months before the move, parents can begin to familiarize the family with schools in the community. The Internet is a great resource for this. Parents and children can visit the district and school Web sites looking for academic credentials and programs, athletics, and clubs available. Many Web sites have posted additional information and news updates about the campus. Such information can help allay your child's fears. A less formal source of information comes through friends who have lived in the new community and whose students have attended schools there. It's important to remember, though, that in addition to whatever facts they provide, they will include opinions, and some people exaggerate challenges because they make for better stories.
- ❖ A school's Web site may provide information about schedules and calendars, including start dates, holidays, and end dates. These are not standardized from state to state, nor even within a state. Incorrectly assuming your children's new school schedule is similar to their current school schedule can result in their enrollment being days and even weeks later than the official start date of the district.
- ❖ Hand carrying school records is vital in a school move. These records may include a photocopy of a cumulative folder, withdrawal paperwork, report cards, information on textbooks used, and a copy of the student's health record. Calling the person in charge of registration, likely a counselor or registrar, several weeks prior to the move will give time to copy these documents.
- ❖ You need to hand carry documentation related to any special programs your child is enrolled in, whether enrichment, gifted, accelerated, special education, or 504 services. This information may be instrumental in your child receiving services seamlessly.

- ❖ When you arrive at your new community, a trip to your child's campus can give him an idea of what to expect. The school may give him a tour and a map so he can familiarize himself with the facility. Knowing where the cafeteria, auditorium, restrooms, and counselor's office are can go a long way to helping a student settle in to a new routine. This presents an opportunity to explore what clubs and athletics are available for your child and how to go about joining them. Remember that although your biggest concerns may be about academics, your child's biggest concern may be about finding his locker or a group to sit with at lunch.
- ❖ Parents can read and discuss the school's expectations for conduct and dress with their child.
- ❖ Meeting your children's principal or assistant principal, counselor, and teachers will go far to establish a personal connection. They may go further out of their way to ensure your child adjusts well.
- ❖ Volunteering on your children's campus or joining a parent organization such as the PTA can help you make contacts at the school while making you and your children more comfortable in new surroundings.
- ❖ Fitting in is vitally important to children and adolescents. A visit to the school's Web site can show pictures of students in the new community. Once you have arrived, look around the community to see what clothing, shoes, hairstyles, and accessories local kids are wearing. It may be that a few purchases would be all it takes to ease your child into his new life in his new community.

Many organizations work to help students transition to new schools. One organization particularly worthy of notice here is the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). It is devoted to helping schools and military installations deliver accurate, timely information to meet transitioning parent and student needs. It focuses on ensuring quality educational opportunities for all military-connected children affected by mobility, family separation, and transition. The MCEC offers online support and materials at [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org), including a checklist for transferring students, a compilation of resources that provides information about each state's school requirements and resources, and SchoolQuest.org, a secure online resource to help families make decisions on schools as they relocate.

Here are a few additional thoughts related specifically to parental deployment.

1. Have a conference with teachers in advance of the deployment and let them know both parents want to stay involved. Give teachers self-addressed, stamped envelopes to send copies of tests and report cards.
  2. The service member can visit the school Web site to see what is going on in the classrooms and, in some schools, can even access current class grades on a weekly basis.
  3. Parents with regular computer access can even help children review papers and projects and give advice before turning them in. Some deployed mothers and fathers correspond with the class and send cultural artifacts and information about the country where they are stationed.
  4. Deployed parents can even help their children learn to love reading. For younger children, they can read books on videotape before deployment and the caregiver can have the child sit on her lap and turn pages as the recording plays. For older children, you can choose books that the deployed parent and child will both read and decide the order you'll read them in. You can have "book club" discussions about the books even during deployment.
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## **The Connection Between Parent and Child**

The most important source of security to a child is the connection with parents. It's naive to believe that deployment will have no effect at all. The goal is to minimize that effect by maintaining strong connections through ongoing communication, effective listening, and family rituals that will serve as reminders of the presence of the distant parent. When parents are involved in any way in children's daily or weekly activities, it sends a strong message that they love and value their children. It's also important to avoid some of the pitfalls of separation, including having children who fear disappointing their parents so intensely that they lean toward perfectionism, or others who rebel, if only to pretend they don't care.

### ***Concrete Reminders for the Youngest Children***

It's nice to have reminders around the house of the deployed parent. Photographs and favorite clothes certainly fill this need. One suggestion that is a little more creative is Flat Daddy or Mommy. Make a cutout of the service member with Dad's or Mom's picture on the face. Make it at least 12 inches tall, but feel free to make it full-sized (if you have a big enough car!). Take

pictures with Flat Daddy or Mommy at family or school events and then send them via e-mail or photo album, telling about the events. This sends a clear picture to deployed parents that they are wanted and needed and serves as reminders to children about how much they want to be there. Parents can do something similar with Flat Child, taking pictures in the tent or mess hall to show that the son or daughter is always with them in their hearts.

Young children frequently ask very basic questions about where their parent is sleeping or eating while deployed. Have your spouse send pictures of himself in his quarters, shaving, eating in the mess hall, and near his vehicle, and make a little album that the child can carry around.

### ***Maintaining Family Rituals***

With frequent moves and deployments, family life doesn't feel routine. During a deployment, chores have to be divided among fewer people, leaving less time to spend together as a family. If you have special family rituals like dinner, going to a game, or working on a hobby together, try to do as many of them as possible even if one parent is overseas.

### ***Listening***

Many parents worry endlessly about what to tell children about difficult topics. When's the right time and right place to say the perfect words? This search sometimes leads them to put off any conversation at all. My concern is that when we don't discuss really important topics, children learn that they should put away their emotions, or they even feel shame for having them. When subjects are avoided entirely, children are left to imagine the worst or make up their own endings. At the least, they worry alone and miss out on discovering that one way to get through difficult times is to connect with loved ones.

Whenever you wish you knew exactly what to say, let your children guide you on what they want to hear. Free yourself from struggling for the right words by reassuring yourself that it's more important to listen than to speak. When you listen, your children have an opportunity to express emotions. When you ask leading questions like, "What would you like to talk about?" you learn the right time to talk. If your children are not ready to talk, it is wise to respect that choice. When you ask, "What is on your mind?" you learn how children are interpreting events. When you ask, "What have you heard?" you learn what messages children might be receiving from others. This last point is particularly important for news events.

Listening is about more than asking leading questions; it's also about noticing behaviors that offer a strong hint of what is going on. A silent child who acts out with rage is actually speaking quite loudly. Rather than react with anger yourself, sometimes it's best to help your child find the words to match his expressed feelings so it is easier for him to use words next time. ([Click here](#) for additional resources and books on building emotional intelligence.)

Finally, try to be available when your children are ready to talk. Because you can't be everywhere, increase the odds you will be there at the right moment by learning the special places where your children are usually in their comfort zones. You may find the best conversations start while working on a project together, while watching television, during bedtime, at bath time, or while driving in the car.

### ***Talking***

Communicating in ways that kids can hear what you are saying has already been discussed in this book, but a few key points deserve underscoring here. To remain calm and reassuring, you may need to think through or sit with your emotions for a while before you talk with your children. Talking about feelings is important, but do so when you can focus on your children's feelings. This will allow them to share rather than have to worry about you. Remember that your children's feelings focus on needing to be protected and secure. Assure them of your plans to make sure they are safe. They are also worried about the service member; therefore, it may reassure them to hear that the deployed parent is well trained to do his or her job.

For advice on talking about difficult subjects once children have guided you to the right time, see "Talking With Children About Upsetting News Events" by Paula K. Rauch, MD, and colleagues at the end of this chapter. You also may wish to turn to another trusted resource, the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences ([www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)). The CSTS offers guidance to parents on communicating with children about very difficult subjects as well as coping during deployment.

### ***Maintaining Communication With the Deployed Parent (as Best as Possible)***

Technology allows communication at levels that would have been unimaginable not too long ago. Separated parents can often be involved in making family decisions and keeping up, to some degree, with family events. Because these communications are so highly anticipated and

their timing is unpredictable, the pressure associated with them can sometimes diminish their pleasure and benefit. Let's frankly discuss some of the potential problems so you can think through how to get the most out of these cherished moments.

First, take care not to make the conversations something children would rather avoid. While it's important to have the deployed parent involved in family function, it's equally important that these touch points not be used only as opportunities to discuss tough issues. As we will discuss soon, don't make these "wait until I tell your [mother/father]" moments. They certainly should be moments to receive guidance, the best kind of discipline. But make sure children have the opportunity to focus mostly on the things in their life that make them proud and to get advice on their concerns.

I am told that it's common for deployed parents to have difficulty finding the right words or setting the right tone because switching mentalities from service member to parent is sometimes hard in these all-too-brief communications. As a result, they may become frustrated with their inability to shut out their environment. Even though they would rather be present with their spouse and children more than anything in the world, they may have trouble even getting the conversation started. Their frustration may be masked by inattention or even anger. But the truth is that the weight of parental guilt they feel in their inability to have a normal conversation with those they most cherish may damage their self-image as an effective parent and could have later implications for reintegration into the family.

Plan ahead to try to minimize the likelihood this situation will occur, although I expect it may happen sometimes to even the best-prepared families. You and your spouse might first create an advance code word that suggests that a check-in is desired but it's not a good time for a deep conversation. If the code word is activated, the conversation can remain light and reassuring to the children, while avoiding straying into harder topics they are not currently prepared to address. With or without a code word, try to accept the spoken or unspoken cues that this isn't a good time to talk. And as best as possible, remind yourself that this is no reflection on your relationship. Next, the parent at home can "drop seeds" to the deployed parent addressing what to talk about. Some military families have told me they have used e-mail to prep the deployed parent on topics of interest to the children and even children's struggles or accomplishments. This assistance with conversation starters may help the deployed spouse avoid the shame or guilt he feels when he's unable to connect with his children.

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Spouses have shared with me that they struggle knowing how much to share long distance. They want to include their husbands or wives but don't want to upset them. A recently deployed mom shared with a group of military spouses that she didn't need to know everything going on, but she did need to know that she was wanted, needed, and loved. She told the group that all deployed parents desperately shared this need. Others in the session suggested that the caregivers agree prior to departure what the deployed parent needs to know. That way, individuals can specify the level of detail important to them. This takes some of the weight off the caregiver or parent at home who is concerned about worrying the deployed parent. Even if this understanding is made prior to deployment, situations can change on a daily basis, and the home parent should remain open to the cues that a given conversation needs to remain lighter.

The pressure of making the most of the few minutes may sometimes be too much for children as well. Parents have related that children sometimes feel shy or awkward trying to summarize their week or express their emotions on the spot. They proposed creating a communications center to alleviate this awkwardness. The communications center consists of a bulletin board and a supply of pens, markers, Post-it notes, and a calendar. The caregiver encourages children to make notes on the communications center board so they can share them during the call to the deployed parent. Children can post notes about sports, grades, or just important stories or feelings. When the parent calls (and you never know when that is going to happen!) the children, no matter their age, run to the board to remind themselves of all they wanted to talk about. This can be great for caregivers and spouses too because it's sometimes hard to remember all they needed to talk about as well.

Another key issue that may interfere with distance communication—for men, in particular—is the language of love. There is no doubt that men love their children as deeply as do women. Nevertheless, many men were raised by fathers who rarely, if ever, expressed their feelings verbally. This translates into many men today still struggling with those precious words “I love you,” or even “I miss you.” When they are home, they display love with the physicality of their presence. They cheer at the sports games and beam with pride at the recitals. They are human jungle gyms, wrestling and giving those attaboy squeezes. Words, however, might be glaringly absent. This becomes a particular problem when they are separated by distance from their children. The reassuring pat on the shoulder or the hug doesn't work

when communication is via computer screen. When distant, words are all we have to remind our children how much we care. Ultimately, we must build a world where there is nothing considered more masculine than a man who knows how to tell his children that they are cherished. In the meantime, we can build a military culture that states clearly, “If you are strong enough to be willing to serve your country, you must be strong enough to tell your children you love them. It will keep your family together.”

A final point: Families have shared with me that children are sometimes scared of the sounds and images that come across via video-chatting technology. To the extent possible, the deployed parent should call from a place that’s relatively quiet and should try to keep frightening objects or weapons out of view as they may serve as a reminder to sensitive children that their parent is in danger.

### ***Staying Connected to the Mission (the Whole Mission)***

Families tell me that one of the greatest frustrations they have is their inability to serve at the level the deployed parent is serving. Children understand that the parent is on a difficult, dangerous mission. It is hard to feel as brave as a parent serving in a war, and the potential exists for children to feel inadequate. They have trouble understanding how they can contribute.

They can take actions to feel connected to the parent’s mission. They can “support the troops” and do their part by joining together with other families and doing things on the home front to make it easier for their own parent; they can also “adopt” a service member by working with Family Readiness Groups to make care packages for soldiers without families. While they have trouble relating to the part of the mission that involves war, they can become young activists on the home front by working to collect resources to improve the lives of children and families in the war zone. This will give them a sense of shared mission that will allow them to feel more connected with the parent.

A first step is helping children to understand and appreciate the complex and important contributions being made by our service members. I consistently hear frustration from military families about how poorly the news media covers the rebuilding efforts. They feel that nearly all of the media attention goes to bad news stories and misses out on human interest stories that many troops share. For children in particular, it is important that some of the good news is heard because they can relate to and contribute actively toward that part of the mission.

### ***Building Memories***

Time is irreplaceable. I cannot imagine how difficult it is for a service member to miss out on developmental milestones; major events like graduations, birthdays, and sporting events; and even daily routines like bedtime. Perhaps the service member can record DVDs or write letters to be brought out periodically or during special events—maybe most importantly, “I love you” recordings, messages, and notes. These remind children of the unbroken bond of unconditional love and reassure them that their parent has gone to serve the nation, not because he or she wants to be away.

Equally as important is for the “home team” to prepare memories to share with the returning parent. Sure, watching a video of a child’s winning goal or first steps will never match being there, but it is the next best thing. Even recording favorite television shows or major professional games can allow the family to experience those missed opportunities together. Annotated photo albums can serve as tools for children to tell richer stories about past experiences. This may spare the returning parent from being limited to typical conversations like, “How was that dance performance?” “Fun.”

Scrapbooks of special projects, creative expressions, and homework will allow a parent to see how children progressed over the time they were apart.

These memory tools will be invaluable for returning parents because they will reinforce how closely parents were held even while they were away. They also may be helpful for the home team by giving them a project to focus on together. Important conversations can be held about the deployed parent while working on the projects. Opportunities for listening and talking may abound when the focus is on the missing parent. Memory tools do not have to be prepared only for the return home. Many families prepare care packages for the deployed member to receive treats from home. These might include special clothes or foods, but the real treats are the drawings, report cards, and family picture or videos that can be included to spark conversations and maintain connections.

### ***Avoiding Perfectionism***

Your children deserve to be children, with all the stumbles that present opportunities for learning. One of my greatest fears for military families is that your children will try too hard to be good to spare you from added stress. Good little boys learn not to go to their parents when things aren’t going well; they fear being the source of disappointment or an added stress. Good

little girls become afraid of thinking outside of the box or scribbling outside of the lines for fear that what they produce won't be good enough. There are many reasons "perfect" children aren't and, more importantly, why perfectionism interferes with long-term success.

Some military children may be at risk for perfectionism for several reasons. The primary reason is that one of the leading causes of perfectionism is children's desire to spare stressed-out parents. Children worry about us and sense when we are at our limits. They may sense the extra stress you are under while your spouse is away or that your spouse may need emotional recovery time during reintegration and push themselves hard to behave perfectly. Next, by necessity, the military has a low tolerance for mistakes, and that may trickle down to families. And a service member is sacrificing so much and being put at such potential risk that families may feel that they too must be strong. This holds the potential of backfiring if strong is misinterpreted as being problem free. No one is problem free, but when people feel as if they must portray themselves that way, they become afraid of revealing any imperfection.

Some perfectionists act like anything but good little boys and girls. The pressure of being perfect, of always being strong, makes them go out of their way to prove that they just don't care. Acting-out behavior builds a strong case for indifference, and some preteens and teens are happy to misbehave if it hides their true feelings of vulnerability. These children sometimes need professional guidance to learn how to say, "I act like I don't care because I care too much."

Parents can be the antidotes to perfectionism. Let your kids know that you don't expect them to be strong all of the time, and listen to them so they can express their real feelings. Tell them that although you might be burdened, your greatest pleasure and most important job is to parent them. Help them understand that they do not spare you when they withhold feelings from you; instead, they make it harder for you to do what you care most about, which is parenting them. Above all, model for them that strong people understand their own limitations. You don't have to feel guilty about your frustrations and your angry feelings either. You don't need to be perfect yourself.

### ***Maintaining a Consistent Parenting Style and Appropriate Discipline***

Prior to having the privilege of hearing concerns about parenting from so many military families, I had made some pretty naive assumptions about the way they would likely parent. Sorry about that. I had thought they would be more likely to take an authoritarian, "You'll do as I say. Why?

Because I said so,” approach to parenting because military culture is rule oriented. In fact, I have learned that many parents feel that their kids have to go through so much that they deserve a break. Some families, therefore, may take a more lenient or permissive, “I love you so much that I trust you to do the right thing,” approach with their children. I’ve been told some families move in this direction during deployment as a “reward” to the children for having to endure deployment. In other words, guilt affects their discipline style and frequently leads to permissiveness. Adolescents especially are experts at working our guilt feelings and may push us toward permissiveness.

The balanced, authoritative style of parenting—“I love you so much. I trust you. I’m going to let you make some of your own mistakes, but for the things that really matter, you’ll do as I say”—produces the best results for children and adolescents. You really are not doing your children a favor by rewarding them with leniency. Don’t get me wrong—I am not promoting a strict approach either. Rather, I recommend that parents unconditionally and consistently demonstrate love and allow opportunities for self-growth all while blanketing their children with the protection that comes from watching them closely and giving clear boundaries.

If you become more permissive as a “reward” for children enduring separation from a parent, they may associate deployment with the time they get away with more. This isn’t good for the smooth return of the deployed parent because children may resent his presence and associate it with lost freedoms. Similarly, if you become more authoritarian because you feel your children need more rules to keep them from trouble, perhaps because only one parent is around, they will resent deployment even more and could harbor anger toward the deployed and remaining parent or caregiver.

It is important that the deployed parent remain as involved as possible in big decisions of parenting, including discipline. This means that whenever possible, the deployed parent should help make disciplinary decisions. If this is possible online, the involvement could be in real time. I would caution strongly, however, against waiting for the next video chat to mete out a consequence because you will lose the benefit of immediacy. Discipline loses its effectiveness if children cannot clearly and directly associate the consequence they receive with the action they took. Especially for younger children, a significant delay can dampen the effect of any lesson. This is true even if that delay is to gain your partner’s participation and agreement. On the other hand, never feel the consequence has to be so immediate that you have to give it while still in a

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rage. If you do that, you are more likely to give a punishment in which children feel like a victim, rather than offer a lesson from which they can learn. Additionally, the moments of communication your children have with the deployed parent are precious. If the parent at home threatens, “Wait until your [mother/father] hears what’s going on!” those conversations will be dreaded. But to exclude deployed parents entirely from participating in discipline removes them from the opportunity to share wisdom, guidance, and life lessons.

The best solution is found in the meaning of the word *discipline* itself—to teach or to guide. Discipline is not about punishment or control. The key to discipline is that children and adolescents learn that the freedom and privileges they have are earned through demonstrated responsibility and actions. This means that discipline can be discussed in advance of any problem; in fact, the best discipline prevents problems. When parents lay out clear expectations that are associated with privileges, children learn exactly what it takes to earn those privileges and what it takes to be able to keep them. Consequences can be immediate—when children shirk responsibilities or break the prearranged rules, they lose the associated privileges. These agreements can even be done in formal contracts: “For me to feel comfortable with XXX, I need to know that you will do YYY.”

If these kind of agreements are made as a family in advance of deployments and perhaps revisited every 3 months while deployed, the separated parent will in fact be “present” with every major disciplinary opportunity. Rather than needing to summon the authority of the distant parent with potentially damaging statements like, “You’re lucky your mother isn’t here,” “Wait until your father gets back,” or “Well, now we have something to tell your father on Wednesday night’s call,” you will be able to say, “Both us agreed that we expect you to XXX and that the consequence would be YYY if you were not able to show responsibility.” That is real discipline, authentic teaching, that includes both of you.

Although prearranged contracts of understanding allow the deployed parent’s views to be represented in big decisions, the reality is that with distance and especially with repeated deployments, the home-based parent or caregiver will have to take more of the day-to-day discipline. Over time, the deployed parent will likely lose authority. This is why it’s so important that these parents are kept in the loop. One parent described how she put it on her teenage son to keep his father in the loop. She would say, “Well, this is a decision your father needs to be involved in, so you should e-mail him and CC me.” She found that making her teen demonstrate

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responsibly by including his father in any big decision before he got an answer helped her son stay connected to his father.

Some military families have shared with me that the real inconsistencies in parenting and disciplinary style occur during R & R leaves and with reintegration. The home spouse who has become the primary disciplinarian sometimes says, “OK, it’s your turn!” and gives up authority. There are several problems with this. The returning spouse may not be ready to assume authority, or it may generate a great deal of confusion in the children. More families have shared that the returning service member wants to be indulgent and limit his interactions with the children to good times. In those cases, the home spouse remains the authority figure and the returning parent becomes overly permissive. Although kids may shower the returning spouse with affection for his or her newfound indulgence, this isn’t the best way to rebuild a fully functional family unit in which both parents ideally share the pleasures and tough decision-making of child rearing.

With regard to discipline, reintegration in the family is difficult whether the returning parent chooses to take a permissive or authoritarian stance. The balanced style—warmth, love, and appropriate rules—remains the best approach. But any rule giving may be met with resistance when the parent has been away. One woman who counsels military families shared that her own father was in the military and although he was very secure in his place in the family, he did not come crashing in with a heavy hand when he returned from deployments. Instead he would walk softly, listen and observe, and take a little time to reenter the system. That way he did not inadvertently undermine the authority and routines his wife had established, and this made his children less likely to rebel against his reemergence into their lives.

There is no way to make any approach to discipline always work in all circumstances when you are dealing with something as complex as a long-distance parent who is fully preoccupied with survival and another parent who is temporarily pulling the weight at home. Nevertheless, any steps you take to keep the deployed parent in the loop and his concerns about rules and expectation understood will make it easier to manage this complex dynamic.

Advanced planning prior to deployment on how to keep the distant parent involved is a critical step that likely will pay meaningful dividends before, during, and after separation. One idea previously discussed is the contract whereby big decisions and expectations are well understood in advance of the parent’s departure. Another idea I particularly like is to have

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constant reminders of the parent's presence. One father told me that he and his wife sat down months before deployment and thought about the behaviors they wanted to promote in their children. They even thought through some of the tough spots their children might go through and some of the words of encouragement that might help them through those bumpy times. The father wrote notes to his children about how pleased he was with certain behaviors and how they made him proud. Similarly, he wrote about challenges and strategies that he had learned to overcome those challenges. The mother then distributed those notes at the appropriate times. The father wasn't present but his wisdom and encouragement were. Most importantly, their children absorbed the message that although Dad was away doing his job, his primary commitment was to his family. This effort took a lot of work and a tremendous amount of thought and planning. The yield was tremendous and allowed for much easier integration because the father's presence was always felt.

### ***A Word on Teens***

Some research suggests that teens may have the greatest difficulty when the deployed parent returns. This should not be surprising. The developmental task of adolescence is to learn to stand on one's own 2 feet and ultimately to become independent. This is why adolescence can often be challenging; teens simply must go through a phase of rejecting your values to be clear about their own. A year in the life of teens brings significant changes and great strides toward independence. These changes might be accelerated if they need to take on more adult responsibilities because of an absent parent. Teens experience these advances toward independence with a great sense of pride and confusion. They want to be able to fly on their own but at times wish that they could curl into a ball, cuddle in your lap, and be fully protected.

Add the strong mixed feelings teens have about their parents to the existing confusion over increasing independence. The reason teens sometimes act like they hate us is because of how much they can't stand how deeply they love us. There is a good chance that although your teen may never say it or even be consciously aware of it, the distance and separation of deployment has increased your teen's awareness of how much he cares about, or worse yet, *needs* his parents. No wonder adolescents' emotions swirl during deployment; they love their parents more than ever and hate them for making them become aware of those emotions.

When the deployed parent returns home, the teen's independence may suddenly feel challenged and some deep emotions may surface. It's no wonder the service member's return may not go smoothly. For these reasons, it becomes even clearer that the return should not be an event as simplistic as getting off of a plane and walking in the front door. An ongoing connection while away will likely make reintegration into the family easier. Maintaining a role in discipline while away will prevent the abrupt "I'm back in charge now!" return that is likely to trigger teen rebellion. An ongoing connection to discipline also might prevent the returning parent from applying the rules and orders associated with a smoothly functioning military command; they are not well suited to a household in which a teenager is appropriately testing her wings and pushing her limits.

The returning parent should honor the teen's growing independence and celebrate milestones achieved. It is likely the teen perceives that she has become the adult in the house and will highly resent being treated as a child. As previously mentioned, this is why the "parentification" of a teenager will likely backfire. But most teenagers will struggle in some way with being treated "just like a kid" when they see themselves as having grown so dramatically. There is no easy solution here. The best way to deal with this is to maintain parental connections, communication, and heartfelt presence during deployment and return with a celebration and acknowledgment of your teen's growth.

Above all, returning service members (as well as the parent at home) have a responsibility to model self-care, appropriate coping strategies, and reaching out to others for support. No one can or should be expected to return home without a lot to work through. Children, and especially teens, will be watching closely to make sure the parent is OK and to see what actions he takes to return to a state of equilibrium.

### ***A Note for Single Parents***

If you are a single parent, your concerns about deployment may be even stronger. You have likely worked out arrangements with extended family, close friends, or community members to care for your children in your absence. The key here is that your children know you are thoughtful about their safety and have carefully chosen people you trust and that you know will protect them. Let them be aware of the plan and, if appropriate, contribute to it. Have a long, detailed discussion with caregivers before you go about your parenting style and your discipline

style so they can do the best they can to maintain a home life that will feel consistent with your own and maintain your values and expectations of your children. This will likely make your deployment easier on you and your children and your transition home smoother.

### ***A Note for Blended and Divorced Families***

As you read any parenting advice, you are likely thinking, “If only it were that simple!” The preceding advice made an assumption that one spouse was at home and committed to maintaining a positive relationship between deployed parent and children. This may not be your reality. If you’re part of a blended family, it will take greater efforts to maintain a relatively consistent parenting and discipline style. If you are part of a divorced couple, there may be some animosity remaining between you and your former spouse. As difficult as this may be, all adults can agree that we want what is the best for our children. The children of deployed service members are already under a great deal of stress, and hearing conflicting messages about adult expectations of them and even hostile messages about their distant parent can be harmful to them. For this reason, all the adults need to agree to disagree behind closed doors and present a more unified message to the child. This will take hard, behind-the-scenes work and may require professional support, but the effort will pay off in the well-being of the child.

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### **Pulling It Together**

This book is about the 7 crucial Cs of resilience: competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control; all will add to your children’s resilience, but 3 apply to you in a very special way. First, thank you for your *contribution*; it really will prepare your children to be people who expects to give back. Next, the key to your family’s thriving despite these enormous stressors is to stay *connected*. Your maintaining a strong connection, despite the challenges put on your family in service to our nation, is key to your being able to *cope* and to your children thriving. Most critically, if you want your children to *cope* with these special challenges and even to thrive, take care of yourself and your primary relationship with your spouse. Certainly the health of the relationship between you and your spouse may have more to do with your children growing up secure than anything else. Finally, demonstrate that strong

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people reach out to others and care for themselves with the same willingness that they care for others. If you struggle with that one, believe me when I tell you that you must care for yourself, for the sake of your children.



To conclude this chapter, I include the following useful educational material written by my colleague Paula K. Rauch, MD, a consultation child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, who directs programs for military-connected families (Home Base Program) and for families in which a parent has a serious illness (Marjorie E. Korff Parenting at a Challenging Time [PACT] Program).



I am appreciative of Mary Keller, EdD; Patty Shinseki; Donna Earle; and Avlyn Bolton of the MCEC who offered critical appraisal and guidance for this chapter.

## **A Dozen Lessons Learned From the Parenting at a Challenging Time Program**

*These lessons are from Paula K. Rauch, MD, and colleagues at the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting at a Challenging Time (PACT) Program ([www.mghpact.org](http://www.mghpact.org)) and the Home Base Program ([www.homebaseprogram.org](http://www.homebaseprogram.org)) at Massachusetts General Hospital.*

- 1. Begin by telling your child about the upcoming deployment.** Decide together with your spouse how you want to describe the separation, what you can share about what you will be doing during this time, and what ways you plan to stay connected during deployment. You may want to share with your child the reasons you chose to serve. Let your child know that he is loved and that you are serving to help protect your family, not because you want to be away from them.
- 2. The worst way for a child to hear difficult news is to overhear it.** News learned by accident is often confusing and inaccurate. Keep the lines of communication open by letting your child know what is happening and what to expect, straight from you. Direct communication lets your child know she is important.

- 3. Welcome all of your child's questions warmly.** Let your child know you are interested in questions about any topic. Be mindful of the settings in which your child is more likely to talk with you, such as in the car, at the kitchen table while you cook, or at bedtime. Try to be available at those times to make it easier for your child to share what is on his mind.
- 4. Try to tease out the "real" questions your child wants to ask.** Ask your child to tell you what she was wondering about, or if there is something else she wants to know. You may find that there's a specific concern or worry that is the "real" question. Many times this specific worry can be more easily addressed than the initial question asked.
- 5. Not all questions require immediate or detailed answers.** It's all right to say, "That's a good question. I'll need to think about it/discuss it with my [spouse, friend, minister, other family member] and get back to you."
- 6. Respect your child's wish to not talk.** Do share basic information, as well as anything that may directly affect your child, to avoid confusion and surprises. Check in with your child from time to time and ask if he is hearing too much, too little, or the right amount about the deployment or other changes at home.
- 7. Don't let your child worry alone.** Encourage your child to share her worries with you. Sometimes people outside the family say unhelpful things with the kindest intentions. Ask your child to share with you what others may have said about war in general or about your family's situation in particular. Tell your child how varied military and family experiences can be and how someone else's experience may not be the same as yours.
- 8. Keep the channels of communication open with key caregivers.** This includes grandparents, teachers, babysitters, coaches, and parents of close friends. Ask your child to help you identify who the key point people should be. By keeping them in the communication loop, you make it easier for these caring adults to provide the appropriate emotional support and stable routine your child needs pre-deployment, during times away, and during reintegration.
- 9. Try to maintain your child's usual schedule.** To help keep the routine as normal as possible, assign a point person for each child. Post schedules, make lists, and use calendars to help your child and caregivers know what each day holds. Talk with each child's teacher and let your children know whom they can go to if they have a hard time at school.
- 10. Carve out protected family time.** Turn off the telephone and ask your friends and extended family not to visit at these times. Designate time when your child has your full attention without distractions. Use these moments to check in on the specific details of your child's day. Listen carefully to hear his successes, frustrations, or concerns about the future.

**11. Create special family time in preparation for the deployment.** Taking photographs, making videos, and creating shared memories helps a child cope with the separation of a parent during deployment. Explore new ways to communicate across the distance such as special Web sites and Web-based telephone services.

**12. Take care of yourself.** Parents need to be mindful of their own well-being and its effect on children. Be sure you get the help you need to feel confident. It is normal to feel worried, but if you are overwhelmed, turn to your support network of family members, friends, clergy, and others who can help you with your emotional health.

## Talking With Children About Upsetting News Events

*The following thoughts are from Paula K. Rauch, MD, and colleagues at the MassGeneral Hospital for Children and the Home Base Program.*

All children are exposed to news via newspapers, radio, the Internet, and especially television (TV). And they naturally turn to their parents with questions about what they have seen and heard. For children whose parent is deployed, news about the wars can raise concerns about their parent's safety. This poses a special challenge for the parent who is at home to listen, understand, and answer the children's questions in a manner that is honest and reassuring. Meeting this challenge successfully strengthens your child's inner strength, sense of security, and trust in you.

First, you know your child best. You have likely been through good times and stressful times before. How your child has reacted in the past is often a good predictor for how he will cope with new challenges. Think about what has been helpful for your child previously, and use these successful strategies from the past. Most children will benefit from maintaining regular routines, including daily schedules and normal expectations for schoolwork. Children will take their emotional cues from the adults in their world. If we are calm, usually they will feel secure; however, it is important to talk to your child about his specific concerns.

Second, check in with your child. Find out what she has been hearing, seeing, and thinking about a new event or whether it has not yet come to her attention. Questions such as, "Are kids at school talking about \_\_\_\_\_?" or "What have you heard about \_\_\_\_\_?" are good ways to open such a conversation. If your child is younger and is not aware of the news, you may elect to go no further with this conversation. If your child has heard about the news event, encourage her to tell you about what she

has heard or what she thinks about what others are saying. Ask if she has any specific worries. To answer questions and allay fears, it is important to really understand what your child is struggling with before you move to answer or reassure her.

Third, TV images can be upsetting. Turn off the TV around young children or those who may have been upset by TV news in the past. Be mindful that coverage of the same violent event over and over again can be misinterpreted as something that is happening repeatedly. Watch TV with older children so you can answer questions and be aware of their feelings. Some older children need to be reminded that the TV images can be overwhelming and that it's OK not to watch. This is true for many adults, who may feel better listening to radio reports or reading newspaper coverage rather than watching disturbing TV images.

Fourth, make the most of family time. Spend extra time with your children. Turn off the telephone and the TV during meals so you can talk together. Often parents can identify times in the day or activities that facilitate thoughtful conversations. Sometimes, it is while driving in the car or when a child sits with a parent who is working in the kitchen. Those are great times to check in with your child and talk.

Finally, when a child feels the world in general is a little less safe, it is important to underscore the active things we do to increase our personal safety. These may include wearing seat belts or bike helmets, eating healthy foods and exercising, looking both ways before crossing the street, and identifying who the supervising adults are in different settings so a child knows who to go to for help. When a child is feeling worried specifically about the safety of the parent overseas, support the child's connection to the parent overseas by using whatever avenues of communication are available. Remaining confident yourself, and reminding your child of the security that comes from the deployed parent's preparation, training, and skills and those of the military leadership, can go a long way to reestablish a child's sense of safety.

The following tips may be helpful at any challenging time:

### **Infants**

- ❖ Infants pick up on the anxieties and actions of those around them, so remain calm when interacting with your infant. Keep routines and environment consistent.
- ❖ Infants may be fussy in reaction to anxieties around them.

### **Toddlers**

- ❖ Keep routines consistent.
- ❖ Television and radio news exposure should be limited and only in the presence of an adult.
- ❖ Offer videos to watch, read books, and play with your child.
- ❖ If a toddler asks questions about what is going on, answer in simple terms. Make sure your child knows that you are there to keep him safe.

## Preschoolers

- ❖ Television and radio news exposure should be limited and only in the presence of an adult.
- ❖ If your preschooler asks questions about what is going on, answer in simple terms. Make sure your child knows that you are there to keep her safe.
- ❖ Spend extra time hugging and cuddling your child.
- ❖ Play with your child. Connect with friends or organize a playgroup.
- ❖ Do some type of special activity together. Watch a movie, play a game, or bake cookies.

## School-aged Children

- ❖ Television and radio news exposure should be in the presence of an adult.
- ❖ Give children plenty of opportunities to talk about what they think is going on, and clear up misconceptions.
- ❖ Encourage children to share their feelings and concerns with you. Let them know it's all right to be afraid and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- ❖ Be available, as this age group may be more interested than younger children in the events but less capable than older children of coping and communicating.
- ❖ Reassure kids that many people are keeping them safe and that your family is safe.
- ❖ Offer special activities or games to them.

## Adolescents

- ❖ Listen, listen, listen.
- ❖ Watch TV news with them.
- ❖ Engage your adolescent in healthy conversation. “What do you think about the events that are taking place in our world today?” “How did you feel when you first heard about this?”
- ❖ Share your feelings with them honestly.
- ❖ Encourage them to express feelings of anger and brainstorm with them about how they can deal with those feelings.

## All Children

- ❖ Be with your children as much as possible.
- ❖ Ask about their understanding of events reported in the news—don't assume you know.
- ❖ Validate feelings that your children share with you as real, ensure they understand that there are no wrong feelings, and tell them that you have similar feelings.
- ❖ When they ask about their safety, explain that you as a parent will do everything you can to keep them safe. Address their specific concerns.

- ❖ If children have questions about the safety of their school, explain that parents, teachers, and school officials are doing everything possible to keep them safe. Address their specific concerns.
- ❖ Children may exhibit some of the following behaviors during stressful times:
  - Regression—acting younger and seeking attention
  - Becoming more clingy
  - Having difficulty sleeping
  - Being more temperamental or making angry comments
  - Talking about acts of violence
  - Playing or acting more aggressively

All of these reactions are normal. It is important to keep talking to your children and allow them to express all of their feelings.

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