Administration for Children & Families
Office of Family Assistance
FATHERS INCORPORATED
National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse
fatherhood.gov

TIPS FOR DADS on Deployment

Part TWO[1]

Before You Deploy: Helping Your Kids Cope



Helping your kids cope with your upcoming deployment is one of the biggest—and most important—challenges you and your coparent will face. One way to take your mind off the more challenging and depressing aspects of deployment is to hang out and have some fun with your kids before you leave.

In stressful situations, children, especially young children, look to their parents for cues on how to behave. So, if you and/or your coparent seem depressed, angry, or withdrawn, it's quite likely your children will start behaving the same way.

Let's look at how children of various ages react to the prospect of a parent's deployment—and identify specific strategies you can use now to help your kids cope better.

[1] This is the second in a series of six National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse spotlights on tips for dads on deployment. The series is authored by Armin Brott, a former Marine, fatherhood author (Ask Mr. Dad), and host of the radio show Positive Parenting for Military Families. The series was developed with assistance from Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated).



BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS

What's Going On?

Although infants don't have the intellectual capacity to understand exactly what's going on, they are incredible emotional barometers. They gather information from their caregivers' vocal inflections, body posture, and facial expressions—all of which can change drastically depending on your mood. By 3 months, your baby can follow your gaze and look at what you're looking at. They can also tell the difference between a fearful expression and a neutral one. By 6 months/, they adjust their behavior to match your facial expressions and tone of voice.

Your baby relies on you and your coparent for security and safety. If one or both of you change your behavior, even temporarily, or change how you interact with your child, your baby may respond by:

- Showing a lack of interest in playing.
- Showing no interest in food.
- Exhibiting sluggishness or withdrawing from the family.
- Exhibiting unusual fussiness or clinginess.

Ways to Help Them Cope

- ***Hang out with your baby.*** There isn't much you can do with infants besides feeding, diaper changing, bathing, dressing, reading to, playing with, and loving them. So do as many of these things as you possibly can. It'll be good for both of you.
- ***Keep talking.*** Of course, your baby won't understand a word that comes out of your mouth but definitely enjoys being the center of your world. Gazing at your baby lets you store beautiful memories.
- ***Keep reading.*** For the first few months, it doesn't matter what you read. Make up a story, sing a lullaby, or read the instruction manual for your M-16. What matters is that your baby hears your voice, your intonation, the rhythms of your speech.
- ***Break out the camera.*** Take lots of pictures of you with your baby, doing all the things you do together. Hang some of these pictures around the house and have your coparent show them to the baby and talk about you.
- ***Leave shirts with your scent.*** Right before you leave, wear a few shirts to bed and have your coparent keep them around for your baby to smell. Like puppies, young babies acquire a lot of information about their world through their sense of smell.





12 TO 36 MONTHS

What's Going On?

Toddlers have a flimsy grasp of time and distance, so they can't fully understand what the phrase "Daddy's going to be away for a while" means. Like infants, though, they are amazingly adept at picking up—and responding to—their parents' emotional state. Your toddler will know something is up and won't be happy about it. Their limited verbal skills prohibit them from articulating their feelings. Instead, they will try to get your attention and may express their dissatisfaction in all sorts of ways, including:

- More temper tantrums.
- Excessive crying.
- Unusual irritability or sadness.
- Withdrawal or anger.



Ways to Help Them Cope

- ***Step down to your toddler's level and have fun.*** For example, get into a cardboard box and take a trip to the moon, paint your nails pink, or follow a lizard on the sidewalk to experience the world with your child. The point is to simply enjoy some quality time.
- ***Keep talking.*** Toddlers don't need any specifics about where you're going or what you'll be doing. Simply say you'll be leaving for a while. Toddlers don't need a lot of warning, but they definitely need to know.
- ***Take lots of pictures of you and your toddler doing things together.*** Laminate some of the photos so your kid can drool all over them.
- ***Video yourself playing with your child, or of you reading a story.*** Kids this age love to see themselves on tape. (Small child, big ego.)



3 TO 7 YEARS

What's Going On?

Preschoolers and early school-age kids are old enough to be told what's going on, but some will not have a firm enough grasp of time or the intellectual ability to make complete sense of what you're saying and to figure out how to react to it. As with toddlers, your 3- to 7-year-old will most likely show you how they feel instead of telling you. Their avalanche of emotions can display in a variety of ways. Some will be positive, others less so. These include:

- Clinginess (usually to Mom) and a refusal to have anything to do with you.
- Restlessness and irritability.
- Acting out.
- Withdrawal and sadness.

Ways to Help Them Cope

- ***Break the news***. It's better to do this sooner than later. Your child probably senses that something's up, even if they can't articulate exactly what. Kids at the young end of this age range still won't have much grasp of time and what "Daddy's going away" might mean. By kindergarten, your child knows the meaning of morning, afternoon, weekdays, weekends, holidays, and summer. For that reason, you can give your child a few more details about when you're leaving, what you'll be doing, and when you'll be back.
- ***Be reassuring.*** Young children are still rather self-centered and tend to look at things through a "how-does-this-affect-me" lens. That's why you must spend time reassuring them and emphasizing that they will be safe while you're away.
- ***Don't take behavior personally.*** Your child may say and do things that will sting. Chances are your child is angry, afraid, or frustrated and is not mature enough to express these feelings in ways that aren't as hurtful.
- ***Leave a little of you behind.*** Preschoolers may still enjoy having a dad-scented T-shirt or blanket. By 6 or 7, many (especially boys) may find this reminder a little strange. However, they will love wearing your favorite fishing hat or playing with your baseball glove. There isn't a kid out there who wouldn't love to have a T-shirt with a picture of daddy on it, or a set of dog tags to keep something of yours close to their heart.
- ***Give your kid a job.*** Preschoolers and early grade-schoolers love to help out around the house. Make the chore simple and fun, like helping to feed the cat or water the lawn.





8 to 12 YEARS

What's Going On?

Kids this age are called "tweens" because they're in between the early school years and the teen years. The range of what's considered "normal" for this age group is huge. Some 8-year-olds will behave more like teenagers, and some 12-year-olds will behave more like second-graders. What tweens have in common, though, is that they still have trouble appropriately labeling their feelings. It's difficult to get them to talk with you about what's going on inside their heads. Here are some ways their emotions might play out:

- Asking many "what ifs" and questions about death, where you're going and why, whether you really have to go at all, and who's going to take care of them while you're gone.
- Angry outbursts followed by clinginess.
- Testing the limits—way more than usual.
- Acting out at home and at school.

Ways to Help Them Cope

- ***Keep listening—and talk if you need to.*** At this age, children are quite capable of talking about what they're feeling. Don't judge their questions. Sometimes they may seem silly, and other times they'll bring a tear to your eye. The fact that they're asking questions at all is an indication that they trust you and feel safe with you. Give them as much information as you think they can handle and plenty of time to digest what you've said.
- ***Show yourself.*** The trick is to be honest about your feelings, but in a way that doesn't burden your children and doesn't make them feel responsible for making you feel better. It's fine to say you wish you didn't have to go or that you're going to miss them. Unless they bring it up, stay away from talking about your fears of being killed.
- ***Give them a job.*** Since your coparent's chores and household tasks has doubled, isn't it time to teach your 10-year-old how to run the washing machine, fold some laundry, or mow the lawn?
- ***Pack.*** You may find it easier to have serious conversations (especially with boys) when you're both engaged in a project (like packing) than when there's nothing to do but look at each other and read too much into each other's facial expressions.
- ***Watch the news together.*** As your children approach middle school, it's nearly impossible to keep them away from the news. Your only line of defense is to watch with your child and talk about what they're seeing. Is the coverage accurate? How does it make you feel? Be sure to also watch some cartoons or a good sitcom and laugh together.





13 to 18 YEARS

What's Going On?

Teens are savvy, and yours are no exception. They understand what you tell them about your job and the changes that will happen around the house. They probably have a good grasp of what war is all about and the various conflicts and missions that the U.S. is engaged in. Depending on their age and maturity, teens may express their feelings more like a tween or more like an adult. They probably won't (or can't) express their feelings, but they may be experiencing shock, anger, denial, fear, sadness, or worry. If you and your teen have a rocky relationship, they may feel relieved that you won't be around for a while. If this is the case, they usually also feel guilty for feeling the way they do.

Here are a few ways their feelings may play out:

- Pushing you away.
- Withdrawing.
- Declining academic performance.
- Experiencing discipline problems at home and school.

Ways to Help Them Cope

- ***Look at the calendar and have a heart-to-heart.*** Are you going to miss your teen's school play, basketball season, high school graduation, college application deadline, or any other important event? If so, talk through it. Ignoring these lost experiences will not make the problem go away. Your teen may not realize you're just as disappointed to be missing those big days—and all the ones in between—as they are. Make it clear you'll do everything you can to stay involved in their life despite being separated.
- ***Keep being there.*** Your role as the father of a teenager has changed from "Dad-the-authority-figure-who-knows-everything" to "Dad-the-coach-who-gives-his-opinion-only-when-it's-asked-for." If you want to have a relationship with your teen, you'll have to do it on their terms. That might mean listening to their music or playing a video game together. Even when they act like they don't care whether you're around or not, teens still need their dad to be there.
- ***Be understanding.*** Although teens may look like adults and demand to be treated like one, they are still kids and need your support, encouragement, and love. Some fascinating recent research has found that the brain grows more quickly during the teen years than at any other time, except the first year. That means the teen brain isn't fully formed yet, and it helps explain some of their wacky behavior.
- ***Have family dinners.*** As they get older, teens may become sullen, sarcastic, and self-centered. Your teen will probably want to hang out with friends more and may be more interested in borrowing your car and a few bucks than spending time with you. Be firm and insist that they endure a couple of dinners a week with the whole family.
- ***Ask for a little compassion.*** Teenage brain development aside, it's critical that you give your teen a sense of the pressure you and your coparent are under as you get ready to deploy. Explain that you need their understanding and support.
- ***Get ready to play.*** The array of games you and your teen can play online is endless, from the old standards such as chess and checkers to fantasy, adventure, strategy, sports, puzzles, and war (like you need more of that). Research the options on your own. Also ask your teens to find a few that they would be willing to play with you.



RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

- **Brott, Armin A.** (2009). The military father: A hands-on guide for deployed dads https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/military-father-hands-guide-deployed-dads
- **Military One Source.** https://www.militaryonesource.mil
- **National Military Family Association.** https://www.militaryfamily.org/