ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance
FATHERS INCORPORATED
National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse
fatherhood.gov

TIPS FOR DADS on Deployment

Part FIVE[1]

During Deployment: Staying Involved With Your Kids



Many service members report that the toughest part of being away from their kids is all the changes and "firsts" they miss—for example, first baby steps, first lost tooth, first base hit, first recital, first missed curfew. Unfortunately, there's no substitute for experiencing any of these firsts. You can't make up for all those lost hugs, kisses, and playtime. But staying in regular contact is a close second to physically being there.

[1] This is the fifth in a series of six National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse Spotlights, which provide 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).

TIPS FOR STAYING INVOLVED



Plan ahead.

- Keep a calendar with the dates of special events in your kids' lives (recitals, performances, games, graduations, and the like).
- After you've asked them, "How are you doing?" or "How's school?" and received one-word responses, be ready to talk about things they care about.
  - This could be music, art, a favorite sports team, weather, venomous snakes, video games, the fifth grade dance, playing with Barbies, or anything else they're interested in.
- Keep a mental (or written) list of other things to talk about. Try to keep it light—ask about life in general, friends, or the family pet.
  - Talking about the most mundane stuff can make you feel closer.
  - Keeping up to date on the little things happening in their lives will reduce the shock when you get home to a bunch of people who have changed.



Remind them that you're always thinking of them.

- Provide plenty of assurances that you still love them while you're gone and will love them when you come back. Kids, especially young ones, need to hear this.
- Stay in frequent contact. And give them a way to contact you if they want to. Being generous with the I-love-yous and-I-miss-yous will help a lot.
- Create a special evening ritual, such as looking up at the sky and remembering that you and your children are underneath the same moon and stars.
- Choose a word or phrase together that will be your secret message. That way when you hear or say it, you'll think of each other.



Create a schedule.

- You already did this with your coparent, but you should also talk with your children about how often and in what ways you'll be able to be in touch.
- Tell them you'll try to be in contact as often as possible, but that it may not always be possible.
  - Remind them that if you don't respond to an email or you're out of touch for a few days, it does not mean you don't care about them.



Correspond directly.

- Whenever possible, talk directly with your kids and tell them you love them. (If you can't call, ask your coparent to kiss them for you and tell them you love them.)
- Address some emails and packages directly to your child. Doing so will reinforce what matters most—that you're thinking of them.

Watch what you say.

- Your kids want to know you're safe. They may ask what you're doing, but you do not have to go into unnecessary detail.
  - Skip descriptions of dangerous patrols you were on.
  - Keep your answers short and casual.
- Share simple details about your life. They may be delighted to hear about a new CD you heard, the food you had for dinner last night, the difficulty of staying asleep when animals are chattering and screeching all night, or how much sand you dumped out of your boots today.

Let them know it's okay to be worried.

- Whether they admit it or not, your kids are afraid for you, and it's important that they feel safe talking to you about it.
- Encourage them to talk to you, and then reassure them that:

  A. You're okay.

  B. Mom will do everything she can to keep them safe at home.

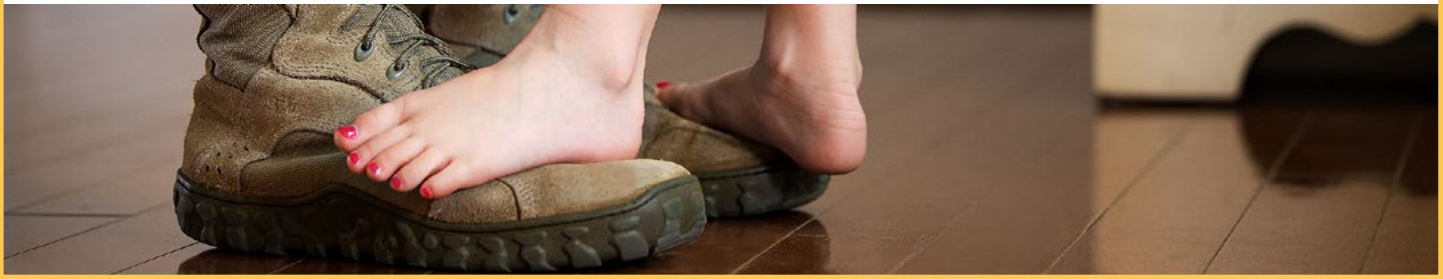
Praise them.

- Tell your children how proud you are of what they're doing—whether it's getting straight As, raising some Cs to Bs, hitting the game-winning home run, learning to play the violin, or helping mom by taking the trash out or making dinner once a week.
- Never assume they know what you're thinking. So be specific with your praise and praise them often.

Be understanding.

Sometimes your young child may refuse to come to the phone or want to stop talking after mumbling "hi."

- Chances are they really do want to talk with you but may be trying to punish you for not being there. Or they don't want you to hear the sadness in their voice (or see it on their face).
- When this happens, do not try to force them to talk. Trying to punish them or make them feel guilty about not wanting to chat will make the problem worse.
- Your child needs to know you love them, regardless of how communicative they are.
- Next time you call, keep asking questions, telling jokes, singing songs, and doing animal impressions. Eventually, they'll come around.



FUN WAYS TO STAY IN TOUCH

Not all of these activities are appropriate for every age, nor is this a comprehensive list. Please use these suggestions as "food for thought" and modify them for your child's needs and interests.



Go low-tech.

Technology has its advantages, but it's no substitute for a good, old-fashioned package from dad.

- Send items such as a dried leaf from a tree near your barracks, a film canister full of sand, or a menu from a local restaurant. This will let your children know that you're thinking of them no matter where you are. It will also give them a tangible sense that you're somewhere, in a real place.
- Younger children in particular benefit from having an object to pull out and hold whenever they want to feel close to you. If you aren't able to send home a Humvee, a set of dog tags will be a huge hit. Kids love them.



Go high-tech.

If you've got access to video calls or conferencing, you can bond with your child and build literacy by reading to them.

- If you and your child have the same book, you get to see each other, laugh with each other, and turn the pages at the same time. You can even blow a good night kiss via video.
- If you can't do video calls, visit United Through Reading (unitedthroughreading.org). This nonprofit organization helps you make a video of yourself reading a story to your child and you can then send the recording home to them via email.



Sing together.

- On your next phone or video call, sing together and perform a rousing duet/trio/quartet of a favorite song.



Nurture family memories.

- Ask your child to send a photo or memento from an activity they're involved in—whether it's a recital program, an art project, a sports event, or whatever they're doing at the moment.
- Share memories about your parents and family when you were growing up.



Get creative.

- Draw a picture and send it to them—your children will love to receive your drawings, regardless of your artistic talent.
- Write "I love you" in pebbles, etch it in sand, draw it in the dirt on a filthy vehicle windshield, or use some cookies you received from home. Then take pictures to send home for everyone.



Collaborate.

Make up a story together.

- You write the beginning, then send it to your kids to add a paragraph or two of their own.
- They send it back to you and you add to what they did.
- You'll produce some fun stories.

Be a tour guide.

- Use a video or still camera to give a virtual walk-through of where you are. Just make sure to keep it G-rated: no gore, no violence, and don't include anything that your child could perceive as upsetting.
- Seeing mess halls, showers, your bunk, men in your unit washing trucks, and other mundane things will help reassure your child that you're safe.
- If possible, send some shots of you holding something that your child sent to you. That will remind them that they're always with you.

Play, learn, and have fun with them.

- If you have internet access, you and your children can log into many sites and play games together. Chess, Sudoku puzzles, and family-friendly video games are never in short supply.
- You could even take an online class together and learn something new.

Snip.

- Write a letter and cut it up into puzzle pieces so your child will get to piece it back together.
- For younger kids, you could cut up a photo.

Teach...and learn.

You're probably learning all sorts of really cool stuff, so share some of it with your children. And ask them to do the same for you.

- Believe me, you can learn something from kids of any age. Do you know what caterpillar poop is called? I had no idea until my 4-year-old daughter told me the answer. She learned it in preschool. It's frass, by the way.
- I also had no idea that ladybugs come out of cocoons.

Surprise them.

- Send home a bunch of little notes and ask your coparent to hide them around the house for your kids to find.
- Post-it notes are fun because you can stick them in all sorts of unusual places, like ceilings, dog collars, under chairs or pillows, and inside lunchboxes.

Use telepathy.

- Agree with your children on a time of day when you'll stop what you're doing and think good thoughts about each other.

Visualize.

- Carry your kids' pictures in your pocket or tucked inside your helmet. Update the pictures often so you can keep up with how they're changing.
- Talk about your kids with your buddies—preferably guys who also have kids and can share their stories.

IF YOUR DEPLOYMENT GETS EXTENDED

Explain.

- Try to be the first one to tell your kids. If that's not possible, make time to talk with them as soon as possible.
- Young children may think you're not coming home because of something they've done. You need to reassure them—probably more than once—that the extension has absolutely nothing to do with them and that you're going to do everything you can to get back home as soon as you can.
- Explain that plans in life sometimes have to change.

Adjust Plans.

- If the extension interfered with plans you'd made to do things or go places with your kids, go ahead and make new plans—it'll give them something to look forward to. Just don't be too specific about dates.

Continue to support your coparent.

- Supporting mom every way you can indirectly supports your children in a big way.



RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

Make sure that all your children's caregivers are aware of the following resources to help your children during your deployment:

- **Kids Across Parents Down** has several books of crossword puzzles designed to be done just like the name says. The site offers a few free puzzles and charges a small fee for additional ones.
- **Military Kids Connect** is an online community for military children (ages 6–17) that provides access to age-appropriate resources to help children deal with the unique psychological challenges of military life. The site was created by the National Center for Telehealth & Technology, a Department of Defense agency. It features secure discussion boards for military kids to connect with others who know what it's like to have a parent deployed.
- **Military OneSource** is a web-based resource provided by the Department of Defense. It contains information for nearly every phase of military life, including a wide variety of deployment resources and information. The site provides information on how to access free nonmedical counseling. Families can also order free age-appropriate books and videos to help kids understand and communicate their feelings about deployment.
- The **Sesame Street for Military Families** website includes videos, guides, and activities to support young children.
- **United Through Reading** is a free service that records service members reading a book to their children, so kids can experience dads reading them a bedtime story even from far away.
- The Military Family Projects Team at **ZERO TO THREE** provides free resources to support military parents and their young children. It includes activity books and helpful brochures.

