

Preparing for Deployment: The Home Side

Overview

Tips for preparing for the deployment of a family member.

- Emotional preparations
- Preparing your home and life for deployment
- Helping children prepare for deployment

The deployment of a family member can be a very emotional and difficult time for many families. But by doing everything you can to get yourself and your family ready, you may find that you are better able to cope throughout this challenging time. Families who know when a loved one is scheduled to be deployed should prepare as soon as possible by talking to children and extended family members about what will happen during deployment, adjusting their routines, and reviewing financial and legal details.

Emotional preparations

Separation from a spouse or partner is hard, whether it's for six weeks or six months. If you know what to expect and come up with a plan for taking care of your household and yourself, you can be better prepared to handle the strong emotions that often come with a deployment.

Everyone reacts to the news of a deployment differently. You may feel

- angry
- sad
- confused
- nervous
- a strong sense of denial

Some people may also start to withdraw from their spouse or partner to try and make the transition easier. All of these are normal reactions to a deployment. But there are things you can do to feel better and get ready. You can

- *Find out as much as you can about the deployment.* Where will your spouse be? How long will the deployment last? By learning as much as you can about where your partner will be and what he or she will be doing, you may be able cope better with feelings of uncertainty. Try to remember that in some cases, you may not be able to get as much information as you'd like because of security issues.
- *Agree on a plan for communicating.* Find out how you'll be able to communicate. Talk about whether you'll stay in touch by telephone, e-mail, or letters, and how often or at what times you'll communicate. Will you be able to send a letter or e-mail each day, or will it be once a week? How soon can you expect to get a response?

- *Make a plan for being alone.* Family members who are at home while a loved one is serving in the military may be able to deal with anxiety and fear if they make plans to take classes, pick up new hobbies, or spend time doing things they wouldn't normally do. Set some personal goals to work toward during the deployment.
- *Talk about your feelings with your partner and encourage him or her to do the same.* Share your fears and concerns about the deployment and work together to come up with a plan for handling them.
- *Find support for yourself.* Many branches of the service offer support in the form of social groups, counseling, or advice. Look into what's available for you as a military family member.
- *Reach out to other people who are going through or have already gone through a deployment.* Participate in any predeployment activities offered by your unit. Military families who have already experienced a deployment may have valuable tips and advice about handling the separation. By reaching out to other people who are preparing for a deployment, you may be able to build a support system for the coming weeks or months.
- *Spend special time together as a couple and as a family.* Take the time to be alone with your spouse or partner before they leave. It's also important for children to have individual time with a parent in the days leading up to a deployment. Make time to be together as a family even if it's just for an ordinary activity like taking a bike ride or playing a game.

Preparing your home and life for deployment

The absence of a family member may mean that you'll have to do things differently at home and in the rest of your life. If you take the time to prepare for these changes, you may find it easier to adjust. Here are some things you should think about when you're preparing for deployment:

- *Review child and elder care arrangements.* If you need help covering your child or elder care needs, contact any services that may be available to you through the military, in your community, or through another employer for support and resources. If you already have a child care plan in place, review it to make sure that the absence of a family member will not be a problem.
- *If there are certain chores or duties that the deployed family member always does, make sure you know how to do them, too.* In some families, one person is responsible for maintaining the car or for grocery shopping. If this is the case in your family, make sure you feel comfortable taking on that responsibility on your own.
- *Update and check legal and financial documents and details.* This should include updating wills and medical directives, creating powers of attorney documents, and ensuring that family members have access to accounts and documents.

- *Make sure all important contact numbers are easy to find.* Gather information about how to reach the deployed family member, including numbers for contacting appropriate military officials for information and updates. Make sure you also know how to contact your spouse's family.
- *Create a family emergency plan.* Talk about what you'd do in the case of an emergency, including where you'd go and how you would get in touch. Involve children and other family members in these discussions in appropriate ways.
- *Talk about how you'll handle finances during the deployment.* If your deployed spouse typically takes care of the family finances, make sure that you feel comfortable assuming these responsibilities. Make sure that you agree on a plan for accessing and using all checking, savings, or investment accounts as well as safety deposit boxes. Go over all bills that will need to be paid during the deployment period, including taxes. If it's necessary, make arrangements for the direct deposit of the paycheck of the person who will be deployed.

Helping children prepare for deployment

It's important to involve children in the preparations for deployment and explain to them exactly what a deployment involves in a way that they will understand. You may also want to

- *Go over the "house rules."* Explain to your child that rules will not change during the deployment just because a parent or family member is gone. Enlist older children to help around the house by taking over a chore or duty that the missing parent or family member always did.
- *Encourage younger children to talk with older children who have already been through a deployment.* If you don't have older children, help your child make connections with the children of relatives, friends, or other military families who are familiar with deployment.
- *Make time for the family member or parent who will be deployed to spend "alone time" with each child in the family.*
- *Take lots of pictures or make videotapes of your child and the parent who will be deployed doing everyday activities.* Document ordinary things, like getting ready for bed, reading a story, eating dinner, or playing a game. Put these pictures in a small album for your child or display them somewhere your child can easily see them. Many families also make recordings of the parent or loved one who will be deployed reading favorite stories so that children can listen to their voices when they are gone.
- *Give your child a special gift before the deployment begins.* This could be anything -- a diary, a scrapbook, a watch, or a bracelet -- as long as it's something your child can hold and look at when she's missing her parent or family member.

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- *Make sure your child understands that he or she will be able to stay in touch with the deployed parent or family member by writing letters, talking on the phone, or sending recordings or drawings.* Sometimes children have trouble understanding the idea of a temporary separation, and they may think that they won't be able to talk to or communicate with their deployed loved one.
- *Come up with a way to count down the time that the parent or family member will be gone that children can understand.* Some families create calendars and mark off the days while others may come up with other ideas like filling up a jar with a chocolate or a sticker for each day the loved one will be gone. If you're not sure how long the parent will be gone, you can mark the passage of time by making a paper chain and adding a link each day that the parent is gone, then use the chain as a decoration when they return.

The time you spend preparing for a deployment pays off down the road. You'll find that you are better able to handle the stress of the separation and take care of yourself and your family.