

Educator's Guide to the Military Child Before, During, and After Deployment

- I. Introduction
 - a. Demands on military members and families are becoming more complex.
 - b. Children are especially vulnerable to emotional distress due to their developmental perspective and limited life experience.
 - c. It is almost certain that one or more students at a particular school will be affected at any given time.
 - d. Stability and normal routine at school can provide an anchor for children.
 - i. Predictability of classroom helps to cushion the impact of deployment.
 - ii. Stresses from family separation have the potential to affect the entire school community.
 1. May interfere with ability of students and staff to focus on learning.

- II. The Educational Community and Deployment
 - a. Research shows that how adults respond to individuals and groups after a crisis can significantly affect the outcome of the student's experience.
 - i. Supportive interventions can minimize stress responses and learning can resume.
 - ii. Effective intervention creates a sense of class cohesiveness and helps to re-establish the student's sense of security and belonging in the class.
 - b. Deployment affects learning by creating instability in families, which in turn causes stress.
 - i. Stressed students have difficulty concentrating, learning new concepts, and controlling emotional expression.
 - ii. Research shows that prolonged stress alters brain chemistry and function, causing students to have difficulty with concentration, memory, behavior, and control of emotions.

- III. Background
 - a. United States is military composed of both active and reserve components.
 - i. Army, Army Reserve, Army National Guard.
 - ii. Navy, Naval Reserve.
 - iii. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Reserve.
 - iv. Air Force, Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard.
 - v. Coast Guard, Coast Guard Reserve.
 - vi. "Active" families live on or near military bases with extensive support systems.
 - vii. Reserve and Guard families often live in isolated areas far from military bases and lack formal support systems.

- IV. Overall Impact of Deployment
 - a. Definition: An individual or military unit is moved within the US or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission, i.e., training, peacekeeping, combat, etc.
 - b. Change, especially when it is beyond an individual's control, produces stress.
 - c. Family roles and responsibilities are redistributed.
 - d. All family members experience feelings of grief and loss.
 - e. Young families have strong tendency to return to the location of their families of origin to increase psychological and physical support and reduce costs.
 - f. Families with multiple pre-existing problems and/or troubled family members are at higher risk for poor adjustment
 - g. Modern technology can be a double-edged sword.

- i. Phone and video contact can help with adjustment, but also make it hard to disguise negative emotions and/or situations.
- ii. Family members may feel “trapped” at home waiting for a phone call.
- iii. E-mails can be harmful to family relationships if they are sent out of anger, frustration, or disappointment; are more easily misinterpreted than phone/video communication.

V. Phases of Deployment

- a. Pre-deployment (several weeks to a year in advance)
 - i. Family is notified that member will be deployed.
 - ii. Feeling of general shock and disbelief; alternate between denial and anticipation of loss.
 - iii. Order, security, and safety of their lives feels shattered.
 - iv. Increasing bond to fellow soldiers results in a sense of emotional and physical distance from family; soldier is already “psychologically deployed”.
 - v. Busy, tumultuous time as family tries to get everything in order for the soldier’s departure.
 - vi. May strive for increased closeness, i.e., plan for “best” Christmas, “perfect” vacation”.
 - vii. Common for parents to have significant argument just prior to deployment; for couples with a short history, this argument can take on “catastrophic” proportions.
- b. Deployment Phase (From time soldier leaves home through the first month)
 - i. Lots of support on the day of deployment.
 - ii. After troops leave level of support may drop off sharply, leaving students and their families with feelings of loss and grief to manage on their own.
 - iii. Remaining spouse/guardians of children struggle with new and increased roles and responsibilities.
 - iv. A time of mixed emotions.
 - 1. Feelings of being disoriented and/or overwhelmed; sleep difficulties.
 - 2. Leaves a “hole” in the family, causing family members to feel numb, sad, lonely, abandoned.
 - 3. Family may feel relief that deployment has finally taken place, especially if it means an end to dysfunctional family interactions.
 - a. Feelings of relief will likely be accompanied by feelings of guilt.
- c. Sustainment (From first through next-to-last month of deployment)
 - i. During this phase, children and families reach different levels of adjustment.
 - ii. Majority of families reach a “new normal” without the deployed family member.
 - 1. Resume life with renewed resiliency and hope.
 - 2. New routines are established
 - 3. New sources of support are identified
 - 4. Feelings of control are regained, resulting in a sense of increased confidence and independence; “I can do this!”
 - 5. Struggle with past problems and new conflicts.
 - 6. Continue to suffer from feelings of depression.
 - iii. Families with multiple pre-existing problems and/or troubled family members are at higher risk for poor adjustment
- d. Pre-Reunion (Month before soldier is scheduled to return home)
 - i. Mixed emotions—anticipation, apprehension, excitement.
 - ii. May be time of high energy for family.
 - iii. Exaggerated expectations—both good and bad.

- iv. Difficulty making decisions as remaining parent takes into account what returning soldier would want.
- e. Post Deployment/Reunion (Typically lasts from 3 to 6 months, beginning when soldier returns)
 - i. Initially reunion is experienced with euphoria and joy for many families.
 - ii. Family dynamics will be changed from pre-deployment state.
 - iii. Beneath the surface are normal issues that must be addressed as the family member re-joins family system.
 - iv. Family members may resent surrendering independence, resulting in conflicts over roles and responsibilities.
 - 1. Some of these may have existed before deployment.
 - v. Family counseling, support, and assistance may be needed to reconstruct family interaction.
 - vi. Provides opportunity to negotiate improved family relationships.

VI. Children and Deployment

- a. Deployment from a Child's Perspective.
 - i. Departure of family member results in a loss of stability which is threatening; if this sudden change can occur, other unpredictable events may also occur.
 - ii. Student experiences a sense of "loss of control" because he or she has no control over the deployment
 - 1. "Control" is a fundamental human need.
 - 2. Lack of control over events that impact daily life can produce overwhelming feelings in children.
 - iii. Individual reactions can vary greatly.
 - 1. Children's immediate reaction often includes fear for their own safety; children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and how the deployment relates to them and their daily lives.
 - 2. Conversely, some children may express relief because it puts an end to pre-existing family tension or dysfunction; or because it resolves the child's anxiety, fear, and uncertainty about when and how the separation will occur.
 - 3. Students may become disruptive and overly active, or quiet and withdrawn.
 - iv. Common stress reactions generally appear within the first 24 to 48 hours, but a delayed reaction can become apparent and cause problems weeks or months after an event.
 - 1. Ages 1 to 5.
 - a. Regressive behavior.
 - b. Persistent fears of being left alone, darkness, strangers, loud noises, storms, animals, other.
 - c. Irritability.
 - d. Confusion.
 - e. Sadness.
 - f. Immobility.
 - g. Disobedience.
 - h. Nightmares.
 - i. Clinging.
 - 2. Ages 6 to 12.
 - a. Regressive behavior.
 - b. Persistent fear about safety.

- c. Irritability.
- d. Confusion.
- e. Headaches and other physical complaints.
- f. Inability to concentrate.
- g. Nightmares, inability to sleep, or excessive sleep.
- h. Not wanting to attend school or change in school performance, either better or worse.
- i. Depression.
- j. Increase or decrease in social activities.
- k. Fighting.

3. Ages 13 to 18.

- a. Significant behavior changes.
 - b. Fear.
 - c. Confusion.
 - d. Headaches and other physical complaints.
 - e. Inability to concentrate.
 - f. Sleep disturbance.
 - g. Increase or decrease in social activities.
 - h. Change in academic or athletic performance, either better or worse.
 - i. Change in peer group.
 - j. Change in appetite, either increased or decreased.
 - k. Aggressive behavior—verbal or physical, toward self or others.
 - l. Apathy.
 - m. Depression.
- v. Referrals to a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker should be made if symptoms persist over several weeks or seem extreme.
 - vi. Children may display significant anxiety up to a year later due to possibility of another separation, known as an “anniversary reaction”.
 - 1. Emotional surges may pass more quickly with the support of loved ones, friends, social contacts, and military affiliations.
 - 2. If separation is extremely traumatic the need for counseling is very normal and sometimes necessary for healing and adjustment to take place.
- b. Reunion from a Child’s Perspective.
- i. Less than 1 year—May not recognize returning parent and cry when held.
 - ii. Toddlers (1-3 years)—May be slow to warm up to returning parent.
 - iii. Pre-schoolers (3-6 years)—May feel guilty and scared about separation.
 - iv. School age (6-12 years)—May want a lot of attention.
 - v. Teenagers (13-18 years)—May be moody and appear to not care about returning parent.

VII. Role of School-based Health and Mental Health Professionals

- a. Assess student’s situation and provide supportive interventions.
- b. Make referrals for additional services as needed.

VIII. Teacher Interventions in the Classroom

- a. As an educator, you are a significant and valuable resource and play a critical role in the life of each student.
- b. Rely on your wisdom and knowledge of childhood development.
- c. Provide structure.

- i. Maintain predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences.
 - ii. When students are distressed about deployment-related issues, consider providing an appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs, and fears and to have their feelings validated.
 - 1. It is important for students to feel that they are not alone emotionally and that school is a safe and caring place.
- d. Maintain objectivity.
 - i. Respond to events in a calm and caring manner.
 - ii. Answer question in simple, direct terms.
 - iii. Help students transition back to normal studies and activities.
 - iv. Refrain from expressing negative opinions about loved one's involvement in military regardless of personal political beliefs.
- e. Reinforce safety and security.
 - i. After classroom discussion of a deployment-related event, end with a focus on child's safety and the safety measures taken on behalf of their loved one.
 - ii. When deployment is due to crisis or war, protect students from unnecessary exposure to frightening situations and reminders.
 - iii. Limit adult-to-adult conversations about frightening details in front of students.
 - iv. Be cautious about having television news as backdrop when students are in class.
- f. Be patient and temporarily reduce student work load as needed.
 - i. Plan for shorter lessons and proceed at slower pace when necessary.
- g. Be approachable, attentive, and sensitive.
 - i. Take time to discuss the deployment and provide factual information.
 - ii. Talk in age-appropriate terms.
 - iii. Limit scary or hurtful communication.
 - iv. Some students may express themselves inappropriately in an effort to cope with overwhelming feelings of fear, anxiety, and confusion.
- h. Be sensitive to the needs of students whose parents or caregivers speak a different primary language
- i. Reassure students that feelings of loss, anger, frustration, and grief are normal responses to separation and that everyone adjusts to change at a different pace.
- j. Acknowledge that it is natural to feel hurt and angry when someone we care about leaves and reinforce ways to express these feelings without hurting self or others.

IX. Intervention Strategies for Students

- a. Rely on your wisdom and knowledge of childhood development.
- b. Elementary-Aged Children.
 - i. Engage in play activities.
 - ii. Paint or draw pictures reflecting feelings and thoughts about how to make things better.
 - iii. Write in a journal.
 - iv. Read and discuss stories about children in conflict and children as problem solvers.
 - v. Write cards or letter to the deployed family member.
 - vi. Make a memory book or calendar reflecting positive thoughts and actions.
 - vii. Take part in individual and group counseling when problems arise.
- c. Middle School/Junior High and High School Children.
 - i. Keep a journal.
 - ii. Engage in art activities.
 - iii. Write poetry and/or stories.

- iv. Write cards or letters to the deployed family member.
 - v. Relax by doing deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.
 - vi. Learn problem-solving strategies.
 - vii. Participate in small group discussions.
 - viii. Participate in support groups.
 - ix. Exercise.
 - x. Listen to music.
 - xi. Take part in individual and group counseling when problems arise.
- X. Specialized training can be beneficial for school staff members.
- a. School site deployment awareness training.
 - b. Consultation with school liaisons from the military services.
 - c. Specialized assessment and intervention training for staff.
 - d. Resource mapping.
 - e. Referral follow-up.
- XI. Helpful website links
- Department of Defense Educational Opportunities: **www.militarystudent.org**
- Military Child Education Coalition: **www.militarychild.org**
- National Military Families Association; **www.nmfa.org**
- National Guard Youth Site: **www.guardfamilyyouth.org**
- National Guard: **www.guardfamily.org**
- Army: **<http://www.myarmylifetoo.com>**
- Navy: **www.lifelines2000.org** (*click on Deployment*)
- Marine Corps: **www.usmc-mccs.org** (*click on Deployment Support*)
- Air Force: **www.afcrossroads.com** (*click on Family Separation or Teens & Youth*)
- Reserves: **www.defenselink.mil/ra/** (*click on Family Readiness*)
- National Children, Youth and Families at Risk Initiative: **www.cyfernet.org**

Sources

Educator's Guide to the Military Child during Deployment. Available at <http://www.militarystudent.dod.mil/>

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective. Available at <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/default.htm>

Hurricane Tips: Stress, Children & Teens: Stress Reactions. Available at <http://um-jmh.org/body.cfm?id=1623>