



Tips for Military Families: Supporting Your Child with Mental Health Needs

Military families have unique needs when a parent is deployed or is returning from active duty, especially if they have a child struggling with mental health issues. For this child, the stress of an absent parent may result in increased emotional or behavioral issues. Your family can often ease the difficult transitions of military life and help your child adjust if you know what to look for and what to do.

What should parents look for?

Children or teens struggling with mental health needs may experience an increase in symptoms as a result of the stress they are feeling about their parent in the military. These symptoms may include:

- Loss of sleep
- Anxiety-related behaviors (grinding teeth, being more sensitive or irritable, etc.)
- Physical problems (headaches, stomachaches, or other symptoms)
- Aggressive and risk-taking behavior, such as staying out past curfew or leaving home without reporting a destination
- Self-inflicted injuries, such as not eating or picking at oneself

A parent returning from active duty may also trigger an increase in symptoms as their child tries to readjust to the absentee parent and his or her role in the family. It is helpful if children can understand the source of their behaviors and have support to help them through this difficult time.

What can parents do?

Family members adapt more easily if they are prepared to deal with deployment and return, and feel connected and supported by their social network. If the parent who returns home has a positive attitude and seeks support and help, a child will feel less stress. There will also be less of a psychological impact during deployment and return. Here are some things you can do to help your child through this adjustment:

- **Develop a plan for regular communication between your child and the absent parent** if possible. Check in with how they are feeling about the plan and ask if it is working.
- **Develop a plan for regular communication between you and your child.** Check in with how your child is feeling.
- **Keep a consistent, normal lifestyle.** Don't change rules or expectations.
- **Watch your child for signs of new behavior or escalated behaviors** that seem to be unprovoked or unusual.
- **Visit your child's doctor** for a screening to detect any mental health or functional concerns. If your child already has a mental health diagnosis, talk with the doctor about any concerns you are seeing and ask for help.
- **Meet with your child's teacher(s)** to talk about the deployment or return, and suggest strategies to address any fears or behaviors that might come up.

- **Ask for help at school.** If your child is acting out in school, meet to discuss some positive ways to address the situation. Ask teachers to keep data on the effectiveness of those positive interventions. Follow up with regular check-ins.
- **Validate** the feelings of your older children and help your younger children express how they are feeling.
- **Don't feel guilty.** Abandonment and fear are normal reactions to being left behind or adjusting to the return of a deployed parent.
- **Find support for yourself.** Parenting is hard work. It is even more difficult when your spouse is absent and possibly in an unsafe setting.

Resources

Finding support and help for your child with a mental health need is especially important during times of stress. The resources listed here can help your family and your child with mental health issues as you learn to cope with the unique stress of military life.

Resources through the Military

Military Chaplain – Each base has a military chaplain who can provide support and resources for families.

Military Child Education Coalition – Helps military children cope with being transferred from school to school around the world. www.militarychild.org

Military OneSource (1-800-342-9647) – Offers help with a wide variety of concerns for the military family (parenting and child care, education, relocation, financial and legal concerns, and other issues). www.militaryonesource.mil

NACCRRRA – Child care resources and referral agencies to help military parents find quality care. naccrrapps.naccrra.org/navy/directory/search.php?program=omcc

National Military Family Association – An advocacy organization for the needs of military families. www.militaryfamily.org

National Guard – Information and resources for families of National Guard members and Reservists. www.nationalguard.mil

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Provides a veterans homepage. www.samhsa.gov

U.S. Department of Defense Military Health System Mental Health Homepage – A site providing resources focused on the health and wellness of military members. www.health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Operation-Live-Well

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – A resource for returning service members struggling with reintegration. www.mentalhealth.va.gov/returningservicevets.asp

The Yellow Ribbon Program (National Guard) – A site that promotes the well-being of National Guard and Reserve members. www.yellowribbon.mil/yrrp

Nonmilitary Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Youth Resources – Resources for youth on mental health disorders and how to get help. www.aacap.org/aacap/families_and_youth/resource_centers/Home.aspx

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Military Youth Deployment Support Website – Help for youth with a parent struggling with PTSD. www.aappublications.org/content/33/6/1.1

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) – A grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. www.namihelps.org

PACER Center’s Project for Parents of Children with Mental Health, Emotional or Behavioral Disorders – A parent training and information (PTI) center in Minnesota for information, advocacy, and support for families of children and youth with disabilities. PACER.org/cmh

Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP) – A federally funded parent training and information (PTI) Center assisting military families who have children with special education or health needs. It provides information and training about laws, regulations, and resources for military families of children with disabilities, connects families to other families, and helps parents and professionals develop community education and support. wapave.org/programs/specialized-training-military-parents-stomp