

# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO THE MILITARY CHILD DURING DEPLOYMENT



## INTRODUCTION

The demands on military members and their families are not only increasing, but are becoming more complex. Military families sacrifice their personal comfort and experience tremendous upheaval when soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, reservists and National Guard members are called to serve our country here or abroad. Children are especially vulnerable when separated from parents due to deployments. Their unique developmental perspective and limited life experience put them at a heightened risk for emotional distress during the separation period.

Schools can be one place where stability and normal routine can provide an anchor for children during the challenges of deployment and the resulting disruptions to daily life. The predictability of the classroom helps to cushion the impact of deployment that often includes changes in psychological equilibrium and disruption of individual behavior and coping skills. Alternatively, the stresses that may result from family separation have the potential to affect an entire school community and may interfere with the ability of students and staff to focus on learning.

This booklet is intended to help educators build coping skills in their students during and after a military deployment. The goal is to bring needed support and understanding to the process and to maintain an optimal learning environment in the classroom and the school. Specific and practical guidelines for administrators, counselors, teachers, and other school employees are presented in order to identify age-related reactions and focus on appropriate intervention strategies. By using the information and techniques in this booklet and adding your own unique perspective and expertise, you will become more knowledgeable and better prepared to assist the military child during the deployment and transition.

## BACKGROUND



Many civilians are unfamiliar with the unique nature and challenges of the military. The distinct history and traditions of the military; the dress, language, rank structure and mobile lifestyle may seem foreign to those who have not experienced military service.

The United States military is a total force made up of the Active and Reserve components including the Army, Army Reserve, Army National Guard, the Navy, Naval Reserve, the Marine Corps, Marine Corps Reserve, the Air Force, Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard, the Coast Guard and Coast Guard Reserve.

Children of military members can be from the active duty or reserve components. They can live on or near a large military base or they can come from geographically isolated commands. Your students may have one or both parents in the military. The children may be sent to live with a relative or guardian in times of deployment. Children of military members may have experienced numerous deployments or may be experiencing the stresses of deployment for the first time.

## DEPLOYMENT

Deployment is the name given to the movement of an individual or military unit within the United States or to an overseas location to accomplish a task or mission. The mission may be as routine as providing additional training or as dangerous as a war.

Deployments have three phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment (which includes reunion). Each phase has unique challenges that require the proper interventions. Although the emotional impact of each phase of the deployment cycle has been carefully documented and studied, it is important to remember that no two students will react the same way. Individual responses depend on a variety of factors such as age, maturity, gender, parent-child relationships, and coping skills of the caregiver during separation.

## PHASES OF DEPLOYMENT

### PRE-DEPLOYMENT PHASE

Notice that the family member will be deployed to another location in the US or abroad is followed by feelings of general shock and disbelief. Students will ponder questions such as “How could this happen to me?” The order, security and safety of their lives and the lives of their family members will feel temporarily shattered.

### DEPLOYMENT PHASE

When the deployment day arrives, there is usually family, unit, and community support. Military personnel are honored as dedicated, self-sacrificing and courageous. In wartime, there is an enormous mobilization during which family and community members provide a range of outward forms of support. As the troops leave and the emotional impact of that separation continues with the passage of time, the involvement of the community and those less affected by the event fades. The students and their families are left with feelings of loss and grief to manage on their own. The remaining spouse or guardians of children (including aunts, uncles, grandparents or family friends) struggle with new and increased roles and responsibilities. Conflicts may surface. During this phase, children and families of deployed military members reach different levels of adjustment. Some have developed or improved coping skills and are ready to resume their lives with renewed resiliency and hope. Some struggle with past problems and new conflicts. Others may continue to suffer from feelings of depression. Actively reaching out to children and families who are experiencing deployment difficulties during this phase can be helpful, especially if support includes the teaching of new coping skills in relation to specific problems. The majority of families reach a “new normal” in daily life activities without the deployed spouse or parent.

## **POST DEPLOYMENT**

Reunion is typically experienced with euphoria and joy when the military parent or spouse returns. Hidden beneath the surface are normal issues that must be re-addressed and resolved as the family works to re-incorporate the returned family member. The joyous return from the family's perspective may bring challenges to the new equilibrium established while the service member was gone. Spouses and children may have operated with a new independence that is not easily surrendered. Old and new conflicts may arise over roles and responsibilities. Family counseling, support and assistance may be needed to reconstruct family interaction. The expectation that the family will be just as it was before the deployment must be addressed. This phase brings different risks and challenges and the opportunity to negotiate stronger and improved family relations.

## **IMPACT OF DEPLOYMENT**

Deployments cause stress due to change for both the service member and the family that is left behind. Regardless of the length of the deployment, the family will have to redistribute family roles (e.g., finances, the maintenance of the house and car, and the care and discipline of children). Among young families, there is a strong tendency to return to the location of their families of origin. These moves are made to reduce costs and to add to the psychological and physical support needed to keep the family going.

Many factors influence family adaptation to deployment. Each individual in the family of a deployed service member must adjust to new roles and responsibilities in addition to the "loss" through separation of their loved one(s). All families benefit from assistance and support in one or more areas but disorganized families with multiple pre-existing problems and/or troubled family members tend to be at higher risk for poor adjustments during deployments and separations.

Most students and their families will be able to adjust to a "new normal" after the departure of a spouse or parent. However, some students who are fragile or who have had previous social or emotional problems may continue to have serious symptoms of stress and their ability to function in the school remains compromised.

Prompt referral for intensive individualized assessment and therapy will be appropriate for students who, after six to eight weeks,

- (1) Have not been able to resume normal classroom assignments and activities*
- (2) Continue to have high levels of emotional response such as continued crying and intense sadness*
- (3) Continue to appear depressed, withdrawn and non-communicative*
- (4) Continue to have difficulty concentrating in school*
- (5) Express violent or depressed feelings in “dark” drawings or writings*
- (6) Intentionally hurt or cut themselves or are at risk for hurting others*
- (7) Gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a period of weeks*
- (8) Discontinue taking care of their personal appearance*
- (9) Exhibit a possible drug or alcohol abuse problem*

The primary difference between a normal and serious reaction is one of degree and duration of change rather than in kind. The withdrawn student who may go unnoticed in a classroom may also need a referral for evaluation. This student may, in fact, need more immediate intervention than the agitated child who is acting out. If any of the “normal” reactions to the stress of deployment persist over six weeks, after the majority of their classmates no longer show any symptoms of stress, then the parent needs to be notified and a referral made to appropriate school, community or military services.

## SERIOUS STRESS REACTIONS

A student may show signs of serious stress during and immediately after deployment to war. The following signs indicate that the student is in acute distress and will need to be referred for immediate evaluation:

- *Unfocused agitation or hysteria*
- *Disconnection from peers and adults*
- *Serious depression or withdrawal*
- *Auditory or visual hallucinations*
- *Any prolonged major change from normal functioning that continues six weeks after deployment*

## INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR YOUR STUDENTS

As an educator, you play a critical role in the life of each student. You are a significant and valuable resource and support as the children affected by deployment learn to cope and also to grow during this time of change. We have provided some suggestions and strategies you can use in your classroom as appropriate. Remember to rely on your own wisdom and knowledge of childhood development to help each child and to assess their individual needs and the needs of the other children in your classroom.

## **ELEMENTARY**

- *Engage in play activities*
- *Paint or draw pictures reflecting feelings and thoughts about how to make things better*
- *Write in a journal*
- *Read and discuss stories about children in conflict and children as problem solvers*
- *Write cards or letters to the deployed family member*
- *Make a memory book or calendar reflecting positive thoughts and actions*
- *Take part in individual and group counseling when problems arise*

## **MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL**

- *Keep a journal*
- *Engage in art activities*
- *Write poetry*
- *Write stories*
- *Write cards or letters to the deployed family member*
- *Relax by doing deep breathing and muscles relaxation exercises*
- *Learn problem-solving strategies*
- *Participate in small group discussions*
- *Participate in support groups*
- *Exercise*
- *Listen to music*
- *Take part in individual and group counseling when problems arise*

## **TEACHER INTERVENTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM**

**FOCUS ON STUDENTS AND THE CLASSROOM LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:** Retain classroom routines and an emphasis on the importance of learning, always leaving room for tending to students' needs.

**PROVIDE STRUCTURE:** Maintain a predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences to provide support and consistency for your students. When students are distressed about news from their parents or the circumstances of the deployment, you may want to find an appropriate time for students to share feelings, needs, and fears and have their feelings validated. It is important for students to believe that they are not alone emotionally and to be reassured that their school is a safe and caring place.

**MAINTAIN OBJECTIVITY:** Respond to events in a calm and caring manner, answer questions in simple, direct terms while helping student's transition back to their normal studies and activities. Regardless of personal political beliefs, as a professional educator entrusted with vulnerable children who need nurturing and support, refraining from expressing possible negative opinions about their loved one's involvement in the military is a significant contribution to their emotional well-being.

**REINFORCE SAFETY AND SECURITY:** After any classroom discussion of a deployment related event, end the discussion with a focus on the child's safety and the safety measures being taken on behalf of their loved one. In the event of a deployment due to crisis or war, protect students from unnecessary exposure to frightening situations and reminders. Limit adult-to-adult conversations about frightening details in front of your students. It is best not to have television news as a backdrop when students are in class.

**BE PATIENT AND REDUCE STUDENT WORK LOAD AS NEEDED:** Expect some *temporary* slow down or disruption in learning when a change affecting students occurs. Plan for shorter lessons and proceed at a slower pace when necessary.

**LISTEN:** Be approachable, attentive and sensitive to the unique needs of children coping with deployment and family separations. Let the child know that they can speak with you or with a school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker about their questions and concerns. Take time to discuss the deployment and provide factual information. It is important to reduce fear and prevent rumors from spreading. By allowing students to ask questions, they can gain information about the event which helps take away some of their confusion. Talk about events in terms they can understand. Limit scary or hurtful communication. Some children may express themselves inappropriately; however, it is important to recognize that this is also a way of coping with overwhelming feelings of fear, anxiety and confusion.

**BE SENSITIVE TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL NEEDS:** It is difficult to express or interpret feelings when children and parents or caregivers speak a different primary language. Bilingual/bicultural personnel are most important in providing intervention services. Teachers and other school personnel must be aware of, knowledgeable about and sensitive to the values and beliefs of other cultures in order to assist students and their families appropriately. Inquire about school, community and military resources that are available to assist.

**ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE FEELINGS:** Help students develop a realistic understanding of deployment. Provide reassurance to students that the feelings of loss, anger, frustration or grief are normal responses to separation. Everyone reacts and adjusts to deployment and change at a different pace.

**REINFORCE ANGER MANAGEMENT:** Expect some angry outbursts from students. While recognizing that it is natural to feel hurt and angry when someone we care about has left, there are appropriate ways to express anger without hurting yourself or taking your anger out on others. Reinforce age-appropriate anger management and adjustment interventions to ensure a climate of nonviolence and acceptance. Make appropriate referral to the school counselor as appropriate.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### HOW OFTEN DO DEPLOYMENTS OCCUR AND HOW MANY OF MY STUDENTS WILL BE AFFECTED?

Although it is impossible to predict the number of deployments that will occur during a time of war and terrorism, it is almost certain that one or more students from your school may be involved in a military deployment at any given time. Schools located in geographic areas where there are large military installations will be most affected.

### HOW DO MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS AFFECT A CLASS?

A deployment that affects one child may affect other classmates vicariously, much as experiences of individual family members will affect the rest of the family. Classroom climate and student behavior and performance may be affected. Interference in the ability of students to focus on learning can result. Administrators may need to set the standard for school climate. Thoughtful classroom discussions may be appropriate for older students during studies of current events but sensitivity and support are required for all students whose loved ones have been deployed.

### HOW DO STUDENTS REACT TO DEPLOYMENT?

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from student to student. Previous experiences or lack of experience with deployment, temperament, personality and the student's assessment of danger to their family member determine the child's reactions. Nonetheless, some commonalities exist when lives are disrupted by sudden separations and dramatic family changes.

- **Loss of Stability:** *Deployments interrupt the normal order and routine of daily life. Lack of stability is very threatening. Deployments can upset the equilibrium for extended periods of time. In the mind of the student, if this sudden change can occur, then it is possible that other unpredictable events might also transpire.*
- **Loss of Control:** *By their very nature, deployments represent events over which the child has no control. Lack of control over happenings that impact daily life can produce an overwhelming feeling in children.*
- **Individual Reactions:** *Children's immediate reaction to deployment often includes a fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them and their family members, to a degree that may be judged by adults as unreasonable. However, young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and the outcome of the deployment as it relates to them and their daily lives.*



Conversely, for a variety of reasons, some children may express relief that the family member has left the family unit. The deployment may put an end to pre-existing family tension or dysfunction or it may represent the finality of an action that resolves the child's anxiety, fear and uncertainty about when the separation will occur.

However shocked or dismayed adults may be by children's reactions, it provides an opportunity for children and adults to understand their respective thoughts and feelings and marks a beginning point to work toward a new adjustment in the family.

#### **4. WHAT ARE COMMON STRESS REACTIONS?**

Acute reactions to separation generally appear within the first 24 to 48 hours. In the two weeks after the deployment, the reactions may change. Behaviors will vary depending upon the age and developmental maturity of the child. It is also important to note that it is possible for weeks or months to pass before a delayed reaction will become apparent and cause problems. (See Normal Reactions to Stress section)

#### **WHEN SHOULD A REFERRAL TO A SCHOOL COUNSELOR, PSYCHOLOGIST OR SOCIAL WORKER BE MADE?**

If symptoms persist over several weeks or seem extreme, teachers, with the help of the school counselor, should contact the parent. The teacher should consult with the school site administrator and support staff to ensure that the appropriate mental health referrals are recommended within the school or community. Support staff members may include the school nurse, school psychologist, school social worker and crisis intervention team member.

The duration and intensity of stress reactions vary greatly depending on the level of impact on the child and family. These emotional surges may pass more quickly with the support of loved ones, friends, social contacts and military affiliations. If the separation is extremely traumatic, the need for counseling is very normal and sometimes necessary for healing and adjustment to take place. Counseling does not indicate that a person is mentally ill. It shows that a person is strong enough to accept help with the goal of learning how to manage changes in a constructive way.

#### **WHY MUST THE TEACHER BECOME INVOLVED?**

It is important to become involved for two reasons. First, studies have shown that the way in which an adult responds to individuals and groups after a crisis can significantly affect the outcome of the student's experience. Once the immediate physical and safety needs of the child are met, consideration must be given to the psychological needs of those affected. Through supportive interventions, delayed or prolonged stress responses can be minimized and learning can resume. Second, the process of effective intervening with

individuals or groups of children can create a sense of class cohesiveness and help to re-establish the student's sense of security and belonging in class.

### **CAN DEPLOYMENT AND THE ADJUSTMENT PERIOD AFTER DEPLOYMENT AFFECT LEARNING?**

Deployment and the period after deployment affect learning by creating instability in the lives of individual students as well as the classroom. Stressed students have difficulty concentrating, learning new concepts and controlling emotional expression. Some students may become very quiet and withdrawn while other may become disruptive and overly active. Their academic functioning may be impaired. Studies have shown that prolonged stress alters brain chemistry and function, causing students to have difficulty with concentration, memory, behavior and control of emotions.

### **HOW CAN MY SCHOOL COUNSELOR, NURSE, PSYCHOLOGIST OR SOCIAL WORKER HELP?**

These school-based health and mental health professionals can help identify the problem and determine the degree of impact on students and on the school.

They should be trained to assess the student's situation and provide supportive interventions that will assist in the student's adjustment.

School-based health and mental health professionals can determine if additional services may be needed from district, community or military sources and can make those referrals.

### **WHAT KINDS OF TRAINING WOULD BE BENEFICIAL FOR SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS?**

- *School site deployment awareness training*
- *Consultation with school liaisons from the military services*
- *Specialized assessment and intervention training for staff*
- *Resource mapping*
- *Referral follow-up*

Many of these services are available to schools through the Family Service Centers on near-by installations.

## CONCLUSION

This booklet is designed to meet the needs expressed by teachers and other school personnel for background information and intervention strategies to support the military child during mobilization and deployment.

The information included in this booklet is not intended to answer all questions related to mobilization, deployment, transition, reunion and re-adjustment. There are a variety of additional resources and deployment support services available at each of the armed services websites (active duty, reserve and National Guard), any military base, or your local community counseling services. Listed below are on-line resources offering further information.

## HELPFUL WEBSITE AND LINKS

Army: [www.goacs.org](http://www.goacs.org) (*click on family readiness*)  
Navy: [www.lifelines2000.org](http://www.lifelines2000.org) (*click on deployment readiness*)  
Marine Corps: [www.usmc-mccs.org](http://www.usmc-mccs.org) (*click on deployment information*)  
Air Force: [www.afcrossroads.com](http://www.afcrossroads.com) (*click on family separation*)  
National Guard: [www.guardfamily.org](http://www.guardfamily.org)  
National Guard Youth Site: [www.guardfamilyyouth.org](http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org)  
Reserves: [www.defenselink.mil/ra/](http://www.defenselink.mil/ra/) (*click on family readiness*)  
Department of Defense Education Activity: [www.odedeodea.edu](http://www.odedeodea.edu) (*click on crisis management tool kit*)  
Department of Defense Educational Opportunities: [www.militarystudent.org](http://www.militarystudent.org)  
National Military Families Association; [www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org)  
Military Child Education Coalition:  
[www.militarychild.org/pdf\\_files/deploymenttr2.pdf](http://www.militarychild.org/pdf_files/deploymenttr2.pdf)  
National Children, Youth and Families at Risk Initiative: [www.cyfernet.org](http://www.cyfernet.org)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document is sponsored by the Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense and is the result of collaboration between representatives from each branch of the United States Military as well as Marleen Wong, Co-Director of the School Intervention Unit, National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, UCLA and Duke University, and Director of Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services, Los Angeles Unified School District.