

Section C-2 Special Interest Topics

The contents of this Toolkit have been developed to assist you in your efforts to support family readiness. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information provided is current and accurate. However, because statutory and regulatory changes may have occurred since the publication of this Toolkit, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs cannot assume responsibility for its continued accuracy. Before taking any significant action based on the contents of this Toolkit, you should contact your Family Readiness Program representative or legal officer, as appropriate, to secure the most current information.

Special Interest Topics

Handling Separations

Every member of the Guard and Reserve as well as their family members has been challenged by family separations. No one believes that separations are easy, but experience has shown that there are ways to make separations less difficult. This section provides suggestions for surviving and thriving during separations from your spouse.

As with most things in life, preparation and information are the keys to dealing with separations. Prior planning and open discussions with your spouse and other family members will make it easier to deal with the new responsibilities you will have to shoulder. Talking about your concerns with your spouse can help you both deal with your emotions. Information about the military, availability of resources, and basic organizational skills are the foundation for a successful and hopefully uneventful separation.

Emotions are closely linked to separations, and they will change with each day and each phase of the separation. Knowing yourself and your own level of coping skills will help you adjust your support system accordingly. Be realistic. Know who you can call and count on to listen, spend time with, or help out if needed. Are you close to your neighbors? Does your family or your spouse's family live near by? How about colleagues at work? Are you a member of a church? Are you in any organizations? Are you involved in the unit Family Readiness Group (FRG)? Talk to your friends, neighbors, family and colleagues before your spouse's departure. Share your apprehension and needs. Build your support system before the deployment.

There are four distinct identifiable stages of the departure and reunion cycle that most family members go through. Both spouses and children often demonstrate their emotions through their behavior. Children will often mirror or mimic the emotional feelings of their remaining parent. Consider these four stages:

- Protest against loss: "It's not fair that you have to leave us." Everyone is apprehensive and often irritable. As the remaining spouse, you may feel tense, angry, or resentful.
- Despair: "How will I ever live through these next few months without you?" You may find yourself restless and waking up during the middle of the night. You may feel fearful.
- Detachment: "Why does he or she have to be away when I need them the most?" Most days you feel in control, you are confident that you can handle the day-to-day living, but you may also experience despair and anger.
- Reunion adjustment: Anxiety and doubts easily surface. "Will he/she still love me?" "Will he/she like the decisions that I made?" Your roles have changed. You may like handling the day-to-day finances and household decisions. You and your children may have a new schedule and mealtime plan.

It is normal to express your emotions and your doubts. Accept them as they are, but be aware of how your emotions may affect your children. Remember that you are the adult, the role model. Share your fears and doubts with friends or someone in your support system. Demonstrate to your children that you are okay and that change can also be good.

Strategies and Coping with Separation

Once your spouse's unit has deployed, it is too late to realize that you need the signature on the document or that you do not know where your important documents are located. These situations can easily be avoided through careful preparation and open communication with your spouse. True family readiness comes from a series of minor tasks and "things to do" that are accomplished well in advance.

The unit does not have to deploy or leave for training for the preparation to begin. Start a "To Do" list. Organize a notebook or a file on the computer of important family documents and information. Look at the deployment checklist and forms in the Service Member section of the Toolkit. Use them. Organize your own notebook, customizing the forms to meet the needs of your family. If you are able to plan ahead and organize, the strain and rush of an unexpected separation will be less stressful. Last minute rushing produces needless family worry and tension. It can result in not completing some parts of the family readiness plan. Your stress affects everyone. Plan, prepare, and get organized ahead of time!

By looking ahead and anticipating the likelihood of a separation, you and your spouse can adequately plan and develop the best strategies to fit your family. Remember, once your spouse deploys, the responsibility for your family primarily rests with you. Ultimately you are responsible for knowing your rights, privileges, and the resources that are available to you.

Sustainment and Communication

Be an active member of the planning and preparation for your spouse's deployment. Make it a family affair. If possible, take the children to your spouse's point of departure. You may want to take them out of school if necessary for this significant event. The more they feel a part of the event, the better they may cope. They will be able to picture their parent leaving with other service members and the unit. After the departure, participate in a planned activity. Make the day special. There is no need to return to an empty house immediately. Think about getting together with other families in the same situation. It may help them understand that they have friends whose parent also left. Get over the "first day hurdle" with the help of friends and family.

Go back to your family routines and time schedule. There is comfort in regular routines. Keep the children's activities the same. Use the deployment to teach your children about the world. Get out a map or globe and show where the unit is going. Talk to their teachers and inform them that one parent is gone for an extended period of time. This will help their teachers understand any mood or behavior changes, and may also cause them to be extra caring during this time. Use mealtimes as an opportunity for family conversations and planning when and how they will communicate with the other parent. Write a letter or type an e-mail message after dinner.

It is important to maintain caring and discipline for your children as if both parents were at home. Children may try to take advantage and push some limits with one parent gone. This is very natural. Continuing their stable home life is important for their emotional and psychological adjustment. Consistent rules, and a consistent daily schedule provide stability and structure for the whole family. Spend special time with your children, but try to keep the daily routines the same.

For family members without children, stay active. See friends. Keep a normal schedule and keep your options open for new opportunities. Maybe this is the time to take a class that interests you or to start a new project. You will have some lonely times. Call friends or family. Take time to reflect. Recognize the early signs of stress. Ask for help when you need it.

Be good to yourself. Do not try to do it all. Prioritize what is critical and pace yourself accordingly. Spend what leisure time you have with upbeat, positive friends.

Communication

Communication during a separation plays a critical role in maintaining an emotional balance for the service member who is away as well as for you and your children. It is very important for family members to share their thoughts, feelings, and information about daily events with your spouse while he or she is away. Communication is much quicker and faster with the availability of e-mail in most areas. Sending e-mail is convenient for everyone if they have access to a computer. Some units will have a family readiness center with computers available for family members to use. They can also assist you with getting a no-cost e-mail address. With e-mail, you can write a few lines when it is convenient for you and no one needs to worry about time zones or the best time of day to call. Commercial telephone calls are still hard to replace, but remain a very popular method of communication. When you converse with your loved one, it is calming and exciting to hear their voice and be able to respond instantly. The cost of calling may be prohibitive depending upon the location of your spouse, and access to telephones.

The unit may also have the capability to hold video teleconferences (VTC) where you are able to see your spouse and other members of the unit. Stay in contact with the unit and the FRG. They are the best source of information on what is happening during the deployment and what resources you can access.

Letters and cards are the least expensive and one of the most satisfactory ways to stay in touch. Military postal systems are usually set up near the unit. Service members will tell you that it is great to get a letter, card, or package from home. Often the unit FRG will sponsor an event to mail "care packages", especially if the separation occurs during a holiday season.

Be yourself and express your feelings to your spouse. Let your spouse know how much you appreciate the letters, e-mails, and any pictures that he or she has sent. Mention in your letters one or two things that make you feel especially close to your spouse. Consider sending greeting cards and post cards. Receiving notes more frequently and regularly may be more important than the length of the letters. Send interesting newspaper articles, school papers from your

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children, or funny reminders of life at home. Encourage your spouse to send separate notes to each child. Send photos. Do not forget the value of humor and a positive attitude. Your description of your carpool adventure or the kitchen disaster may make your spouse feel closer to you and the family. Feelings are great to express – just try not to indulge in self-pity.

Make the best of your separation. Take it day by day. You may look back on it as a personally enriching opportunity where you have learned new skills and truly appreciated how self-sufficient you can be. Turn the challenge of separation into an opportunity for self-discovery, growth, and a stronger family unity.