

# Teenagers and Deployment

## Overview

Ways to help your teenager cope with a family member's deployment.

- Emotions and the stages of deployment
- When a deployment is extended
- Seeking outside help
- Other resources

Deployment causes strong emotions for everyone in the family. It can be especially hard on teenagers, who are often experiencing turmoil of their own simply because of their age. But your support can go a long way toward helping your teenager deal with the difficulties of deployment. In fact, the deployment period can be a time of personal growth, as your teenager takes on added responsibilities and makes emotional adjustments.

## Emotions and the stages of deployment

Each step in the deployment cycle presents challenges -- from the time the family learns of the deployment until after the service member's return and reunion with the family.

### Before deployment

As family members anticipate their loved one's departure, they are likely to experience anxiety about the future. Fear of the unknown can lead to feelings of helplessness, anger, and sometimes guilt. The range of emotions your teenager feels may bring about a variety of behavior, including:

- denial
- fear
- moodiness
- bickering
- emotional distance
- restlessness
- negativity
- disobedience or disrespect

Here are some ways to help your teenager cope with predeployment stress:

- *Have a family discussion about how the deployment will affect each family member left at home.* Topics like these may be especially important for your teenager:
  - What will my responsibilities be?
  - How will I get to after-school activities?
  - Will we have enough money?
  - Can I still drive the car?
  - How will I talk to you while you're gone?

## 2 • Teenagers and Deployment

- What do we do if there's an emergency?
- What if I don't like the changes?
- What will happen to us if something happens to you?
- *Encourage your teenager to share her feelings with you.* In the weeks before deployment, the service member will be spending more and more time on preparations for deployment. It's important for your teenager to know her concerns are being heard.
- *Plan some time for your teenager to spend alone with the deploying parent.* This could be a scheduled event or just some "down time" together, relaxing and having fun. Let your teenager suggest some activities.
- *Develop a relationship with your teenager's guidance counselors and teachers.* Don't wait for report cards to find out your son or daughter has been struggling.

### During deployment

Deployment is a time of emotional ups and downs. With a parent absent for an extended period, children may feel lost, empty, or abandoned. Instead of expressing such feelings directly, your teenager may show symptoms such as these:

- crying to release pain and anxiety
- refusing to have contact with the absent parent
- having physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, stomach aches, insomnia, headaches, nightmares, restlessness, nausea

Here are some ways to help your son or daughter cope during deployment:

- *Make it easy for your teenager to communicate with the deployed parent.*
  - E-mail, cell phones, and instant messaging (when it's available) provide immediate contact, and many teenagers are comfortable with these communication styles. Try to use your teenager's preferred style of communication when it's possible.
  - MotoMail -- an express messenger system that downloads, prints, and delivers letters from home -- is available to you if your deployed service member is a Marine. Far speedier than traditional U.S. mail, MotoMail is ideal for deployed troops without easy access to computers or unable to wait in long lines at an Internet cafe. Messages are usually delivered within 24 hours. (Many members of other services located with deployed Marines also have access to the service.) Register and send messages from [www.motomail.us](http://www.motomail.us).
  - Personal Web pages and blogs provide a chance for self-expression and a creative way to keep loved ones up-to-date.

### 3 • Teenagers and Deployment

- Letters, postcards, and greeting cards for special occasions -- or no occasion -- are always appreciated.
- *Try to approach discussions from your teenager's perspective.*
  - Share control of the conversation by letting your teenager discuss the topics that are the most important to him.
  - Practice your listening skills in advance.
  - Allow some time for light chatter as well as serious subjects. Try to balance discussions of homework and household chores with talk about friends and events at school.
- *Maintain structured routines at home.* Teenagers, as well as younger children, gain comfort from a stable routine at home. Stick to daily schedules of family life such as bedtimes, TV viewing schedule, and practice routines for music and sports.
- *Share information about the war as appropriate.* Don't dwell on negative news or extensive TV coverage.
- *Suggest ways for your teenager to deal with her own emotional stress.* These might include:
  - keeping a journal
  - engaging in art activities
  - writing poetry
  - writing stories
  - relaxing by doing deep-breathing and muscle-relaxation exercises
  - learning problem-solving strategies
  - participating in small group discussions
  - participating in support groups
  - exercising
  - listening to music
  - taking part in individual and group counseling when problems come up
- *Keep a list of resources available to your teenager.* Include hotline numbers, mental health professionals, and educational professionals such as guidance counselors. Teenagers are more likely to use such resources if they are easy to find in times of need.

### Post-deployment

The joy and excitement of reunion is often mixed with apprehension. Deployment changes everyone, and it can take weeks or months to reintegrate the service member into the family. Here are some things to remember as you prepare for your service member's return and reunion:

- *Think positively about change.* You and your spouse can help your teenager and other children by adopting a positive attitude about the changes that have taken place since deployment.
- *Give your teenager time and space to readjust.* Take time to discuss what's been going on in your teenager's life during the deployment. If you're the returning parent, try to listen in an open, nonjudgmental way, keeping in mind that adolescents are sensitive to criticism.
- *Take advantage of the support services and programs available to you through the military.* Each service branch offers resources that help both family members and deployed service members make the homecoming transition smoother. This includes information, counselors, the installation chaplain, family support groups, online support groups, and organizations and clubs for spouses, such as the Key Volunteer Network. Reserve families should contact their unit family readiness group or chaplain; they can also use all of the services of their nearest installation.

### When a deployment is extended

An extended deployment creates hardship for families. From the moment you receive the news of the extended deployment, you may experience a flood of emotions, including feelings of sadness and disappointment, anxiety, and anger. Experts agree that a deployment extension is often harder on families than it is on service members.

During this difficult time, you may find it helpful to remind your teenager of the following:

- *The emotions you are feeling are normal.* There is no getting around the fact that a deployment extension brings feelings of stress. You may feel flooded with feelings and overwhelmed for days or even a few weeks until you have had time to adjust to the news.
- *You are not alone.* Military family life is a life of constant change. There are schedule changes, family separations, and extended deployments. The more you talk with others in your situation, the easier this time will be and the less alone you will feel. Participation in family readiness groups is a good way to stay connected.

### **Seeking outside help**

If your teenager continues to have trouble adjusting to the stress of deployment, don't hesitate to contact your physician or a mental health professional. Make the call promptly if any of the following behavior continues for more than two weeks:

- inability to resume normal classroom assignments and activities
- high levels of emotional response, such as continued crying and intense sadness
- depression, or appearing withdrawn and noncommunicative
- difficulty concentrating in school
- expression of violent or depressed feelings in "dark" drawings or writings
- significant weight loss or gain
- lack of attention to personal appearance
- drug or alcohol abuse

Get help *immediately* if your child intentionally hurts or cuts himself, appears at risk of hurting others, or expresses suicidal thoughts.

### **Other resources**

#### **Military Student**

[www.militarystudent.dod.mil/](http://www.militarystudent.dod.mil/)

Information about deployment descriptions and frequencies, along with related educational, social, and emotional issues of children.

#### **National Guard Bureau Family Program Online Community**

[www.guardfamily.org/](http://www.guardfamily.org/)

Contacts, information on programs and benefits, and more. Includes tips, tools, and training on family issues.

#### **National Military Family Association**

[www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org)

The nonprofit National Military Family Association is dedicated to educating military families about their rights and benefits and influencing legislation and policies that affect them. The Web site's "Deployment & You" section provides many resources.

#### **Military Teens on the Move**

[www.defenselink.mil/mtom](http://www.defenselink.mil/mtom)

Information for military teenagers dealing with life transitions.

### Web sites for individual service branches

Official and unofficial sites include:

#### **Air Force Crossroads**

*www.afcrossroads.com*

#### **MyArmyLifetoo.com**

*www.myarmylifetoo.com*

#### **Navy Teens**

*www.mwr.navy.mil/mwrprgms/teens.html*

#### **Marine Corps Community Services**

*www.usmc-mccs.org*

#### **Your installation's support services**

Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center can help you with questions or problems relating to deployment.

#### **Military OneSource**

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. Face-to-face counseling sessions are also available. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at *www.militaryonesource.com*.

Written with the assistance of Dale Thompson, Program Specialist, Children, Youth and Teen Programs, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps; Karen S. Morgan, Program Analyst, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy) Office of Children and Youth; and Larrie Ann Jarvis, Child and Youth Programs Analyst, Commander, Navy Installations Command.