

# *Staying in Touch When a Family Member Has Been Deployed*

## **Overview**

Ways to communication open when a family member has been deployed.

- Communicating in general
- When you're sending letters and packages
- When you're using e-mail and the Internet
- Helping children communicate
- Keeping in touch without an e-mail or post address
- Other resources

When a family member has been deployed, staying in touch can become difficult. But the military has worked hard to set up communication channels -- including e-mail and other mail systems -- to make sure that service members and their families can keep in contact across the miles. The following information can help you understand how to communicate well with your service member, whether you're sending packages and letters by ordinary mail or messages and pictures through e-mail.

## **Communicating in general**

Whether you're communicating with your service member by regular mail or by e-mail, it's important to keep the following in mind:

- *Be sure you have the correct address* so that letters, packages, and e-mail messages are delivered as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- *Learn about any guidelines for military mail*, such as how and where to pick up mail, what you can and cannot send, how long it may take for a letter or package to reach your family member, and what rules may exist for sending e-mail messages and attachments. (The section below called "When you're sending letters and packages" provides more detailed information.)
- *Try not to worry or be disappointed if you don't always get a quick response*. Although it's important to communicate often, keep in mind that there may be times when your service member is in places where mail cannot go, that e-mail systems can often be unreliable, or that your service member may be too busy to respond right away.
- *Let your service member know how much you appreciate his or her response*. Tell your service member how much it means for you and other members of your family when you get a letter or e-mail.
- *Be sure to answer any questions your service member asked in an earlier message*. If you ignore questions, your family member may spend time wondering and worrying about why you didn't respond.
- *Try to express yourself clearly*. Remember that you won't be there in person to explain what you mean when your family member reads your letter or message, so try not to leave any doubts about what you're saying.
- *Be honest*. You don't have to hide things or pretend that you're feeling fine when you're not. Your family member may be able to tell that there's something you're not saying and then worry about you.

## 2 • Staying in Touch When a Family Member has been Deployed

- *Don't try to read between the lines of letters or notes that you receive.* Try not to make assumptions or judgments based on just a single sentence or the overall tone of a letter or e-mail. If you don't understand something, ask your questions in your next letter or phone call rather than spend time wondering and worrying.
- *Remember to keep security in mind* when asking your service member questions about his or her overseas missions and when sharing messages from your service member.
- *Be creative.* Letters and e-mails are great, but there are lots of ways you can make them even better. For example:
  - you can send a message in the form of an audio cassette, CD, DVD, or video-tape recording
  - if you have children, you can send artwork, school papers, or even a photocopy of their handprints
  - you can send clippings from the local paper or tape recordings of a family gathering; a child reading, singing, or playing music; or even just the sounds of your home
  - you can create a family Web page and post pictures or messages regularly

### **When you're sending letters and packages**

#### **Specific instructions**

Your Family Readiness Group, Key Volunteer Network, or Spouses Support Group should give you some specific information about mailing letters and packages. You can also look to these Web sites for special package information:

#### **The Military Postal Service Agency**

<http://bqdainet.army.mil/mpsa/mid.htm>

Handles all mail for every branch, and provides instructions for packages and letters. Depending on where your spouse is, certain restrictions may apply:

- *Perishable items and sometimes pork items* (including dried pork rinds) are usually prohibited. Anything that can be considered pornographic is also prohibited.
- *Don't send anything that can't handle high heat or changes in air pressure*, or anything that can be seen as dangerous, like knives.
- *Pay close attention to address restrictions.* You can no longer send mail addressed to "any service member." In most cases, you need the service member's rank, full name, and overseas address, from his or her unit. Most branches require a return address.

### The United States Post Office (USPS)

*www.usps.com*

Makes sending packages and letters to deployed members pretty simple. Follow their guidelines along with your service member's unit instructions. When sending mail through the post office, remember to:

- *If possible, know where your spouse is generally deployed to.* Some units may not give out this information, but if they do, it can help postal workers identify exactly what you cannot send.
- *Be prepared to fill out forms that list the contents of your packages.* List all items and don't let anyone near your gift package at the post office if it isn't sealed.

According to the USPS, the average amount of time it takes for mail to arrive in country is about 10-15 working days. It might take quite a bit longer for letters and especially for packages to get to your spouse.

### Other suggestions

The following tips may also help if you're mailing packages or letters:

- *Keep some addressed and stamped envelopes on hand, ready to mail.* This can make it easier to write a quick note. You might want to pass out pre-addressed and stamped envelopes or postcards to friends and family members. You may also want to send your service member pre-addressed envelopes to make it easier to send letters home.
- *Consider numbering letters* that you send and receive so it's easier to keep them in order.
- *If you send a package, try to remember that your family member may not have a lot of space.* Think about sending small disposable presents like a favorite section of the Sunday newspaper, or personal items, such as soap or toothpaste.
- *If you plan to send food items,* take special care with packaging. Always check to make sure that any package you send meets with regulations. For more information, go to "care packages" at the Operation Military Pride Web site at *www.operationmilitarypride.org*.
- *If it's possible, send your service member calling cards.* Look for the best rate you can get. Many military calling cards offer cheaper rates from certain overseas locations. Look at the Army and Air Force Exchange Service Web site at *www.aafes.com* for more information. And be sure to check with your Family Support Center -- they sometimes offer calling cards that have been donated through fundraisers on the installation.
- *Send photos.* You don't have to send professional pictures or photographs of special events. Pictures of your pets, your neighbors, your child's sporting event, a recital, or another occasion are bound to be appreciated. You can also send

photos of your home and other places that are special to you and your family member. Some families document an ordinary day in photos and send them as a kind of “picture story.”

### **When you’re using e-mail and the Internet**

E-mail is convenient, fast, and inexpensive, which makes it a great way to communicate during a deployment. These suggestions can help you make the best use of this handy communication tool:

- *Don’t be too hasty.* Because e-mail is instant -- or nearly instant -- it’s possible to click the “send” button and send something that you may later wish you hadn’t sent. If writing an e-mail makes you feel better when you’re upset or mad, go ahead -- but wait before you send it. Put it in the “draft” column of your e-mail program. Then come back a few hours later or the next day and review what you wrote to see if you still want to send it.
- *If your family member is in the Marine Corps or is a member of the Army or Navy and co-deployed with the Marine Corps, check into using “Motomail.”* This free service lets you write an e-mail message to your service member that is then printed out in hard copy and delivered -- usually within 24 hours. This is particularly helpful for service members who don’t have ready access to the Internet or time to stand in long lines at Internet cafes. Go to [www.motomail.us](http://www.motomail.us) to find out how to use the service.
- *Use the Internet for more than e-mail.* If you can use the Internet to stay in touch, there are lots of things you can do beyond sending e-mail messages. You can create a Web page with pictures and news -- or find a service that hosts Web pages -- or you can “talk” with your family member in chat rooms. You can also send digital pictures or use a scanner to send newspaper clippings, artwork, or a child’s report card or school papers.
- *Remember to keep hard copies of e-mail messages you receive.* These are important historical documents -- both as to our nation’s history and your family’s history.

### **Helping children communicate**

It’s important for children to feel like they are keeping in touch with a deployed family member on their own instead of hearing news or greetings secondhand. Here are some other ways you can help them keep that sense of connection:

- *Encourage your child to send artwork or write letters, and make sure that the family member who has been deployed sends e-mail or letters addressed and mailed directly to the child.* This may help your child understand that the family member is thinking about and missing her.
- *Some deployed service members can read books to children overseas, thanks to a program called United Through Reading.* Through this program, service members can read children’s stories or sing songs to their children, on videotape or DVD, from

installations worldwide. For more information go to the Family Literacy Foundation Web site at [www.read2kids.org](http://www.read2kids.org).

- *Help children find a way to communicate that works for them.* Some children may like to use a tape recorder to exchange spoken messages, while others may like to write letters or send e-mail. Others, especially younger children, like to communicate with pictures. Help your child explore all of the different ways he can communicate. Encourage your deployed family member to follow the child's cues -- by responding with a recorded message, for example, or by drawing a picture of where the service member sleeps or of a typical meal.
- *Give your child her own stack of pre-addressed envelopes and paper to make it easier to send a letter.* Try to take the time to help your child think of things that her family member may like to know about. Sometimes children have trouble starting a letter or knowing what to say. Make sure your child knows that her deployed family member is interested in anything that's going on in the child's life -- whether it's about a homework project, a walk to the park, or something funny the family pet did that day.
- *Think about making a "flat daddy" or "flat mommy" for your child.* Some families find it reassuring to have large-size, cut-out, mounted photos of a deployed parent in their home. You can learn more about making one at the "I'm Already Home" Web site at [www.imalreadyhome.com](http://www.imalreadyhome.com). You might also want to think about making a life-size photo of your young child to send to a deployed parent.

### **Keeping in touch without an e-mail or post address**

For security reasons, there may be times when you don't have an e-mail or post address for your service member. This can be difficult for both of you. But it doesn't mean that communication has to end. These suggestions can help:

- *Keep a journal of your daily life.* A written log of your children's activities and your own everyday events will help your family member stay up to date. Write about your child's birthday party. Write about your good days and your bad days. In the long run, your service member will feel included in family matters.
- *Online photo albums.* Go to [www.snapfish.com](http://www.snapfish.com) or [www.kodakgallery.com](http://www.kodakgallery.com) and make an online photo album. The service is free and easy to access. When you do get news from your service member, and if he gets a chance to go to the Internet, the photos will be a pleasure to see. Keeping the album -- instead of sending attachments -- will make it easier and quicker for a deployed service member to access pictures.
- *Don't forget your spouse's birthday or special anniversaries just because of a deployment.* It will mean a lot if you still wrap a birthday gift and get a card for birthdays even when you cannot talk. If you can't send out packages or gifts, keep them wrapped for your spouse's homecoming.

**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 provide you with information and support.

**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. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at *www.militaryonesource.com*.

Written with the help of Sherri Hrovatin, Services Commander in the Air National Guard and Program Manager for Military OneSource.