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Parents Called to Active Duty: Helping Children Cope

All Americans are affected by the prospect of going to war, but members of the military, the reserves, and their families are likely to feel the greatest, most immediate impact. The disruption to family life caused when a loved one is deployed is difficult under any circumstances. However, memories from 9-11 and concern over the possibility of further terrorist attacks here at home may compound a family's typical feelings of anxiety. Adults and children may experience strong emotional reactions, such as fear, uncertainty, a sense of vulnerability, loss of control, isolation, anxiety, anger, and sadness. Children of all ages will need extra attention and support to cope with their feelings. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers must reassure youngsters and help them understand what is going on factually, what to expect in the days to come, and how to manage their feelings. Following are a few suggestions on how to help children cope.

Suggestions for Caregivers

- **Keep children informed.** Children need to know the truth regarding the events taking place and the active duty assignment. Discuss what you know. At the same time acknowledge what you don't know and how things may change with time. Remember that uncertainty produces anxiety in all of us. Let your children know that information may change and that you will update them as new information becomes available. Use a map or globe to help children understand where their parent is going.
- **Discuss events in age-appropriate terms.** Share information that is appropriate to the child's age and developmental level, using words that they can clearly understand. You may need to restate information in several ways and to ask them to repeat what they heard you say to ensure good communication. Young children may require repeated reassurance during the day. School age children can understand tasks and assigned duties of the deployed parent. Adolescents may want to discuss issues related to war as well as their loved one's responsibilities, lifestyle and potential risks.
- **Acknowledge and normalize children's feelings.** Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage any questions they may have regarding this event. Listen and do your best to understand. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that others may be feeling the same way and that their reactions are normal and expected.
- **Share your own feelings.** Children know when their parents or other important adults are upset and will worry more if you are not honest. Confirm for them that you also miss the person who is on active duty, that life is a little harder not having them home, and that you want them to be safe. Discuss your plans for coping with these feelings and changes. Model for children that you are engaged in active strategies to cope with your feelings (and not just ignoring them). Don't forget to express hope and faith that things will be okay.
- **Provide extra support and reassurance.** Your time, attention, and reassuring words are extremely important at a time like this. Emphasize that the family will be fine and that the children will be taken care of at all times. To the extent possible, take time each day to focus on your children and do something they enjoy (read, play a game, talk, go for walk, bake, etc.). Also, follow the routines that are familiar to your children.
- **Involve children in planning how to cope.** Brainstorm ways to support each other and positive things they can do to show their love and support. Creative activities such as drawing pictures, writing letters or stories, or baking cookies to send to the loved one on active duty helps children feel more in control and provides alternative ways to express their feelings.

- **Maintain routines as much as possible.** The less disruption to your daily lives, the better and the more reassured children will be that everything has not changed.
- **Share household chores at age appropriate levels.** Children can help pick up some of the duties of the deployed parent, such as mowing the lawn, doing the dishes or taking out the garbage. However, children should not be expected to become the parent in terms of responsibilities.
- **Shield children from financial worries.** Concern over money can add to your anxiety, particularly in the case of reservists who have had to give up a significant income. It is fine to let children know that the family needs to be careful about spending, but they are not capable of taking on the burden financial concerns.
- **Reach out to others.** Consider networking with other families under similar circumstances for comfort and support. Plan social gatherings. Offer to help each other with family chores, such as car pooling, mowing the lawn, babysitting, homework help, etc. This kind of support and connection is good for adults and children. Help your children understand that is okay to accept support; they may be in a position to support others in the future.
- **Take advantage of existing resources.** The military has extensive support services for families of active duty members. This includes information, family mentors, counselors, logistical support, etc. If you don't live near a military base, tap into community resources. Your children's school is an excellent place to find out about such resources. In some cases, schools are organizing support networks for military and reserve families.
- **Address concerns that a loved one may be injured or killed.** If children express concern about a loved one being killed or injured, explain that the chance of returning from this conflict is very high. Advances in medicine and technology have greatly reduced potential losses from military actions. Our military is very powerful and has been planning carefully for engagement. Very few U.S. lives were lost in recent conflicts, such as Afghanistan and the earlier Gulf War. Acknowledge that the loss of any life is sad, but that their family member is likely to be fine.
- **Be willing to discuss the concept of death.** Children may be more concerned about dying or their loved one dying, particularly given the intense focus on death in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Talking with them is important. Use developmentally appropriate language. Outside resources can be very helpful (e.g., books geared to different ages that explore death and dying, grief and hospice organizations, or your faith community, if part of your family life). If the child comes from a home with a resilient belief system or faith, it will likely provide resources for addressing this issue.
- **Recognize and respond to changes in behavior.** Some children may have difficulty at bedtime. Others may regress (bedwetting, refusing to dress themselves, ignoring household chores, needing more help with homework, etc.) and/or become more defiant or angry. It is important to maintain consistent expectations in behavior and levels of responsibility. However, be flexible in terms of your children needing physical closeness, e.g., sit with them as they fall asleep, hug them, let them do homework in at the kitchen table, etc.
- **Be aware of youngsters at higher risk.** Some children may be at increased risk of severe emotional reactions because of pre-existing stress factors or mental health problems. Consult a mental health professional immediately if your child shows signs of extreme reactions (persistent aggression, withdrawal, hurting themselves, sleeping or eating problems, talk of suicide, etc.).
- **Take care of your own needs.** Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. You are likely to feel a range of emotions (anxiety, fear, sadness, even anger) before your spouse or partner leaves. These emotions may continue for a while after departure, or you may feel emotionally drained or disoriented. Talk to other adults. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.**

- **Maintain good communication between home and school.** Let your child's teacher know if a family member is on active duty and if you have any special concerns. Encourage the teacher to keep you informed as well. Parents should also remember that teachers might be under heightened stress like everyone else. Not only are they providing extra support to their students, they may also have loved ones who are called to active duty and/or trying to cope with their own personal reactions to events.
- **Teachers should assess student needs.** Listen to what students talk about. Know who has family overseas. Make time for class discussion (or activities if the children are young). Be sure to have a map or globe. Be prepared to answer questions factually or to guide discussion about difficult issues. Seek the help of your school psychologist or counselor if you are unsure of what to say. Be careful of large group discussion about the war if your students have strongly differing opinions. Such discussion can turn adversarial when emotions are running high. If need be, hold discussions in smaller, more homogenous groups or individually. Again, your school psychologist or counselor can help.
- **Schools should reach out to the community.** Know what resources and support services are available for your students and families. Let the community know of any resources or information you can make available.

Resources

Army Deployment Handbook <http://www.wood.army.mil/mwr/deploymenthndbook.htm>

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <http://aacap.org>

American Red Cross <http://www.redcross.org>

Federal Emergency Management Agency <http://www.fema.org/>

National Association of School Psychologists <http://www.nasponline.org>

Adapted from material by Tom Doland, Supervisor, Psychological Services, Chesterfield County Public Schools, VA and materials posted on the NASP website following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

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