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# Supporting children, young people and families during periods of deployment and at home



## A guide for parents and carers

Australia and New Zealand

October 2009

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Young Diggers is committed to supporting military children, young people and families.

Our work is ongoing; we are always pleased to receive any comments

that may help us improve our material.

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**As soon as you know your digger<sup>1</sup> is going to be mobilised you should start making plans to help you and your family manage whilst they are away. Many areas of your life will be affected by their departure, but the deployment will be a lot easier to bear if you and your family are well prepared.**

*Note: The information in this booklet can be used as a guide when your digger is deployed, and also as a guide for every day living.*

*With the preparation of this booklet  
Young Diggers acknowledges support from  
Service Children's Education (SCE), United Kingdom  
In allowing us to adapt their material to our needs*



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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this guide the term 'digger' is used. This is a generic term to cover all Australian and New Zealand military personnel, male or female, of the Army, Navy and Air Force

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## Introduction

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Military families know that being in the Australian or New Zealand Defence Forces is not a routine day-to-day job. Deployment is what the services train and prepare for; it is at the heart of what they do.

Deployment brings special challenges for those left at home. It affects family life and tests our ability to cope with change. But change is a fact of life; everyone responds differently and manages in their own way.

Most families cope very well and find that they grow stronger as a result of their experiences. This booklet has been prepared to help a very wide range of people, including parents and children themselves.

Each deployment brings with it new challenges. We look at the issues for children and families during each of the stages of deployment.

## Pre-deployment

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Pre-deployment is the phase of preparation for departure and separation. This may last a few weeks or a few months depending upon the length of notice given.

Those deploying are focussed on training and the military task ahead.

The practicalities of having to manage the family alone are uppermost on the minds of those remaining at home.

*The pattern of family life starts to alter and even the youngest can feel it.*

Changes can worry children. They sometimes need to feel able to share their thoughts and feelings as they make sense of what is happening. It helps to create a climate in which they can talk openly and honestly with you ★ their family ★ friends ★ teachers ★ other trusted adults.

## Quality time with your children

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All parents know the value of spending quality time together; it is not about providing special treats but giving personal time and just enjoying simple things in each other's company.

The most important priorities are to provide the time and space for your child to talk to you and to listen to them when they do. Often bath and bed times can be a good chance to chat and reassure.

Allow time in your regular routines for simple conversations about day-to-day things. This will also give you the chance to notice any of the less obvious signs that your child may be feeling.

Parents who set aside regular quality time to chat with their children from an early age, as a simple part of their routine, tend to develop better relationships and be more approachable.

Be sensitive to the fact that your child may not want to talk about some things, but if necessary say: 'I can tell something is bothering you; would it help to share it?' Talking about things that make them unhappy can sometimes make them feel worse—so be careful not to dwell—allow times when they can get feelings off their chest when they need to and then move on.

Sometimes children simply do not know why they feel troubled; there does not have to be a reason. It is simple, familiar day-to-day routines and chats that help reassure and bring a sense of normality and security.

## Questions on children and young one's minds

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The following could be questions you may be asked.

Where are you going?

What is it like there?

When will you be going?

How long are you going for?

Why are you going?

What will you be doing?

Who else is going?

Will the family rules change?

Will I have to do extra jobs?

Will I still be able to...?

Who will look after me if...?

They may have lots more questions. Listen carefully and let them talk. Encourage them to share what is on their mind. Keep your answers simple and avoid too much detail. Share the conversation with your partner to make sure you are not giving mixed messages. Mixed messages confuse and can cause unnecessary stress. Above all be truthful.

### ***Be truthful***

*Children often sense when they are being lied to. Don't underestimate their resilience. If you are not sure how to reply to a question, look for the answer together.*

## **Answering your child's questions**

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The following may be useful.

### **Where are you going? What is it like there?**

Spend time together finding the location on a map of the world. Talk about how you will be getting there. Put the distance into context by comparing it with a journey they know. Concentrate on describing the climate, terrain, and your living conditions; children often like to know simple things such as where you will sleep or what the food will be like.



Older children may want to know more about what the geography, climate, terrain, the lives and customs of people there.

### **When will you be going? How long are you going for?**

The Unit's deployment date may be firm, but timing for individuals can often change to meet operational and local needs. Don't be too specific until your dates have been finally confirmed. Last minute changes happen frequently and can cause additional upset.

### **Why are you going? What will you be doing?**

Reassure your children that you are going because you are doing a special job for your country.

Remind them that you are a highly trained professional and that you will be doing everything possible to keep safe.

Older children are often aware of some of the background to the deployment; this is usually based on information from TV and newspapers, which is not always accurate and may be slanted. It is worth spending time talking it through to dispel concern as well as check they are not watching too much.

### **Who else is going?**

Young children sometimes have odd ideas about cause and effect; they may feel you are going away because they have done something wrong or that you don't love them any more.

Knowing who else is going—especially a friend's Dad or Mum—can be reassuring and help establish a support network.

### **Will the family rules change?**

Some changes to family routines will be needed when there is only one parent at home.

Try to stick to familiar routines, regular meal and bed times, and keep changes to a minimum.

Keep to your usual rules and expectations and ways of enforcing them—it avoids problems of readjustment when the family is together again.

Be careful not to threaten children with what will happen; 'When your father/mother gets back'. It undermines your own authority and may affect the way they view the homecoming. Also, be careful never to suggest; 'If you don't behave yourself Dad/Mum won't want to come back'.

### **Will I have to do extra jobs?**

Being a 'lone parent' is demanding—young children like to feel they can help and it can take their minds off things that may be worrying them. Avoid telling children they are now in charge, or that they need to look after Dad/Mum. Instead, talk with them and identify a few specific regular tasks that can be their responsibility.

Choose tasks that are age appropriate and make sure they are ones they can easily succeed with; such as putting out the rubbish, setting the table, taking the dog for its daily walk, feeding the fish.

Older children need to know they have a part to play and sharing the chores can also be a good time to chat.

Let your children know you are proud of them and appreciate the extra help they will be giving.

### **Will I still be able to...?**

Boredom and inactivity allows time for anxieties to fester. So, social and recreational time is important.

Taking part in clubs and activities helps keep young people and children

- ★ Stay occupied
- ★ Maintain friendships
- ★ Enables the parent at home to balance time with others in the family, catch up on tasks or have time for themselves

Being a lone parent may make it difficult to get to and from activities, but the benefits are worth it. Others are often in the same situation, sharing the task with another parent helps both families and can provide companionship.

### **Who will look after me if...?**

Should an emergency occur the following organisations will provide support.

Australia

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Services (VVCS)

Phone: 1800 011 046 (24 hours, 7 days)

or

New Zealand

Veterans' Affairs New Zealand (VANZ)

NZ Freephone: 0800 4 838372

International: +0011 64 7 8597676

8am-5pm Monday to Friday (NZ time zone is 2 hours ahead of Australia)

At other times things can crop up that may mean you need a friend to help. If children/young people know who will look after them if you are unavailable for some reason—they are less anxious if a problem should arise.

Consider choosing a 'trusted friend' who can be contacted if you are not available. Without committing them; discuss the possibility to gauge your child's reaction. Make sure they are able and agree to take this on. Provide the school and Unit with their contact details and confirm both parties agreement to the arrangements.

### **What will we do if Dad/Mum gets hurt?**

Do not give false reassurance such as; 'Of course Dad/Mum won't be hurt'. At first, deal with the emotions behind the question rather than try to give a direct answer. Acknowledge these emotions; 'I know you are worried about Dad/Mum'. This allows space to try and balance fears with other ideas that shift the focus.

Sometimes young children can feel a general sense of unease or anxiety without really knowing why, or without being able to give a reason. It helps them to describe the feelings they are experiencing and to learn how to deal with them; also encourage them to notice the times when they are able to forget for a while or find it easier to deal with feelings. Dwell on the good times and happy memories.

Offer reassurance that it is Dad/Mum's job and they are good at it. Explain that is why they spend a lot of time training and that they will do everything they can to stay safe.

### **They may have lots more questions**

Listen carefully; do not overwhelm them with details—keep your answers simple. Share these conversations with your partner—mixed messages can cause confusion and distress. If you don't know the answer—say so calmly and with confidence, and then find out together.

## Be truthful—it helps build trust

Don't underestimate the resilience of very young children. Children/young people often sense when they are being lied to.

## Take proper care of yourself

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You will need a break from time-to-time, and you also need to maintain good habits like regular exercise and a balanced diet. You really will cope better if you do.

Coping with the family on your own creates new demands, but remember you are not the only one and there are plenty of people you can turn to for support.

- ★ Stay in touch with your friends and look for ways to support others in the same situation or become a volunteer
- ★ Share some of your feelings with your children, but don't overburden them with worries or fears
- ★ Knowing you have feelings helps them manage theirs too

Make time for yourself and make sure that you talk over your feelings and concerns with other adults. Don't spend time alone dwelling on what might happen and fearing the worst; focus on the positives and things to look forward to.



*How you deal with your feelings will affect how they deal with theirs.*

## Preparing for departure

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Some children take a parent's departure in their stride, particularly those children who have had lots of experience of separations. Most children (and adults) are likely to feel sadness. This is normal and natural, although there are some things you can do to help.

Things that make a difference

- ★ Keeping family routines as normal as possible right up to the day of departure
- ★ Reminding them of other times when they have been able to cope in similar situations



- ★ Making plans for ways of staying in regular contact
- ★ Involving them in your preparations
- ★ Planning ahead for events and occasions that will happen during the deployment (such as birthdays and anniversaries)
- ★ Short goodbyes

### **A few ideas for the person preparing to deploy**

- ★ Letting your children help you prepare (roll your socks in balls, count t-shirts—nothing too crucial)
- ★ Making sure they see you find a special place for their pictures
- ★ Exchanging ‘comfort items’ (a stuffed animal or a personal keepsake to look after during the separation)
- ★ Spending individual time with each child before you leave
- ★ Planning ways in which you will keep in touch
- ★ Making sure the children each have a family photograph to keep with them

### **Practical ideas for planning ahead**

Record your children’s favourite stories for them to listen to at bedtime. Hearing your voice can be very reassuring. A video recording can be even better.

Buy and write in birthday and other cards for events that occur during the time you are apart. Hide them with your partner at home so the children do not find them in advance—if for some reason the mail lets you down—they will know you thought of them. You can still send a special note whilst you are away.

Create a ‘Memories box’ of things that remind them of good times together; sit down with your children, give ideas and help them decide what they want to put in it—photographs, tickets, badges, old toys, hats, scarves (things the child could put on), pressed flowers, after shave. Objects with a story behind them that can be re-told, the funnier the better.

*As the time for separation draws closer family emotions can be mixed*

*Will they be okay? ★ concern ★ guilt ★ sadness ★ excitement ★ it’s what I joined to do ★ adrenaline rush ★ lets get on with it*

*Anxious ★ confused ★ fearful ★ let down ★ upset ★ worried ★ sad ★ irritable ★ conflicting feelings*

*Pride ★ anger ★ sadness ★ determination ★ sense of loss ★ resilience*

They all can be normal reactions—but sometimes they are difficult to share. Hugs and cuddles can often say more than words.

## Saying goodbye

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There is no easy way to do it—although it may be upsetting—it is less upsetting than not having said farewell.



Keep it short. If, having said goodbye the transport is delayed, consider if it is wise for young children to have to repeat the upset for the sake of a couple of hours.

After the initial sadness—almost all children and young people do adjust—some more quickly than others.

## Adjusting to separation

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With departure the child's world changes; home feels 'different'. At times like this it is the familiar and regular aspects of their lives that provide comfort and reassurance. This is why routines are important. School is part of that continuity and can be the least disruption part of their world.



### A feeling of loss

Life is about change, and from a very early age children have already begun to learn about coping with change and transition. Generally, reactions tend to vary according to age and development; but all children learn their own ways of adapting.

For very young children, it has been described as being like the experience of looking for something you have lost and becoming so confused, that you almost forget what it was you were looking for. Something feels 'different' but it is hard for them to explain.

They are aware of a generalised feeling of unease, anxiety or discontent, without really linking it specifically with the fact that something is missing, or that Dad/Mum is not at home. The young child's sense of time is also different from that of an adult.

Memories of the absent parent are more likely to fade over time, and there can be a reduced sense of permanence. Familiar objects, pictures, pre-recorded stories on audio/video can all help to keep memories fresh.

Children up to about eight years old sometimes have odd ideas of cause and effect. They may remember an argument before Dad/Mum left and somehow blame themselves for them leaving. As children get older they develop a better understanding and question more effectively. Memories of the absent parent have a greater sense of permanence and the child is better able to appreciate that the person still exists, but is simply in another place.

## When children are upset

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When a child is troubled, the common most reaction is one of emotional regression; the child may simply act as they did when younger or earlier childhood difficulties may return (such as bedwetting). This is all perfectly normal and usually temporary.



Reactions vary depending on the age and development of the child. Some may become clingy or fretful, reluctant to separate or unwilling to attend school. Some may become moody, irritable and argumentative. Some may generally lose interest in things and become withdrawn.

### These are normal reactions to unusual events

A minor or brief change is not a cause for concern, often these sort themselves out with patience and understanding—but where there is a persistent and obvious change you may need to seek advice.

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As a parent you will already have successfully dealt with many of these things in the past by

- ★ taking their minds off things for a while
- ★ listening sympathetically
- ★ being patient, calm and tolerant
- ★ keeping to principles, but making allowances
- ★ reassuring and supporting
- ★ not being over-protective
- ★ calming and defusing when feelings are running high

### Be forgiving

When children are distressed or upset they may say very hurtful things they don't really mean—try not to react in the heat of the moment—when they are calm explain how you feel and that you understand that sometimes we all say things without thinking.

### **Be tolerant and understanding**

Be tolerant and understanding of changes in your child's behaviour. But, being understanding does not mean allowing them to get away with behaviour you find intolerable, or becoming over-indulgent and showering them with treats and presents in an attempt to make them happier. Children are reassured by consistency and firmness, so being clear, calm and keeping to your principles reduces confusion and anxiety. Choose the right time to talk things through and never in the heat of the moment.

### **Be honest and share feelings**

Your child will be aware if you are stressed, even when you try to hide it. They will find it easier if you can say for yourself why you are snappier, or quieter, or sadder than usual. Do not lie about where Dad/Mum is—it is better if you tell them, than if they hear it from other children. Also, it is confusing if a child has anxiety around them, but is told that everything is normal.

Reassure them, but do not give false reassurance. Explain things to them in simple terms and try to answer their questions, but protect them from worrying detail in news reports.

### **Reassure them of your love and support**

Some children may not understand that Dad/Mum has to be away, and can feel abandoned, unloved and unimportant, or even sometimes that they have driven him/her away. Physical reassurance is important. Make opportunities for cuddles, hugs and being close.

Most children and young people cope very well—many even benefit—learning how to cope better with life's challenges, although some may require help. If you are worried that problems are becoming persistent, you should talk to someone.

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### **Anger and tantrums**

This may be the way in which they are expressing their sadness. In childhood, anger and sadness are very close to one another, and it is important to remember that adult experiences of depression are very similar to what children feel when they express anger.

Anger and aggression are not the same. Anger is a temporary emotional state often caused by frustration. Aggression is an action that may hurt a person in some way or damage their property. When anger and aggression coincide they can be very difficult for a parent.

An expression of anger or distress can be an emotional release valve. Respond calmly, defuse the situation and lower the tension. Give space and allow time to recover. Don't back off, but avoid argument or discussion when tensions are raised. Once the tension has reduced it can be possible to talk things through.

If the child has behaved unacceptably, reassure them that you understand why they might be feeling upset—feelings can be shared and talked about. **The problem is the behaviour—not the person**—children can learn to deal with their feelings and adults that set consistent boundaries help children to feel secure.

Keeping calm, defusing the situation and maintaining clear boundaries are all important. Children that are very agitated or upset rarely respond to reasoning or being argued with—adults are the same.

### Aggression

The first priority is to **bring the situation under control** for the safety of the child and those around them. Do so in a way that **calms things down**. You are in control if you are calm and the risks are reduced. If may be necessary to remove the child to a quieter place to calm.

- ★ Being calm puts you in control
- ★ Calming your children enables them to listen and do as you ask
- ★ Giving them positive choices allows a way forward

As a simple guide

1. Deal with the behaviour but feel for the child

Set your boundaries consistently—as soon as it happens—make sure you have the child's attention and state clearly, firmly, and calmly that this behaviour must stop; 'I understand you are upset but cannot allow you to... hurt... swear... kick... etc...'

2. Reduce risk and calm the situation

Do this as soon as possible. Physical punishment should not be used; it only winds things up even more. If another child is at risk of being hurt an adult may block an action or restrain briefly; it should only be sufficient to stop the action, never prolonged or with unnecessary grip (sometimes a light touch is all that is needed). With younger children, taking them to a quieter place for a 'time out' can be very effective. Make sure that the child does not become too distressed or frightened that they are themselves losing control.

3. State calmly what you will do if the behaviour happens again

When the child is able to listen, state calmly what you will do if the behaviour happens again; 'If I am not able to stop this happening we will have to... go home and not go out for a treat later... it is a shame because I know you were looking forward... etc...'. Don't threaten, but think through what you may need to do.

4. Calm the situation

Calm the situation by the tone of your voice, using positive physical contact—gentle touch, normal affection. Show you understand—soothe the situation. If necessary distract by focusing the child’s attention on something else; ‘I need someone to carry this bag for me...’. Be clear about what you want the child to do next; ‘In a minute we are going to go back to the car and I want you to... help me decide what we have for lunch... choose whether this is now going to stop so we can enjoy being together...’.

5. Focus on something positive and notice as things improve

At the first opportunity focus on something positive and notice as things improve; ‘That’s so much better... good to see that smile again... I think if we continue like this for a while we might still go out for a treat later...’. Give children choices and for the older child make it easier to comply without loss of face.

6. Take time to talk things through

When the time is right and you have the child by yourself later in the day, perhaps just before bedtime routine, take time to talk things through. Show appreciation of good behaviour that has happened since; ‘It is so much nicer to have good time together...’. Help your child to understand why you could not allow the **behaviour**, but show that you still love the **person**.

## Bedwetting

For a child who has been dry for some time, this can be extremely embarrassing and they will need reassurance and comfort.

For younger children, a simple chart with sticky self-adhesive pictures to represent a ‘dry’ night often works.

Be wary of allowing the younger child to come and share your bed if they have wet theirs. Not just for the obvious reasons; this habit can become hard to break.

For older children, it is important to talk the problem through with them to build their confidence. Enabling them to be self-sufficient so they can help manage the routine—changing bedclothes and sheets—can reduce embarrassment and build confidence.

If the problem persists seek advice from your doctor.

## Clingy immature behaviour

A very clingy child can be very tiring and can try your patience to the limit. Try to remain calm. They need reassurance and love to help them feel secure. Increased physical contact and longer bedtime routines with extra quality time together can help.

Do not simply react to the clinging behaviour by immediately providing comfort; this can be habit-forming and makes it much harder for the child to break.

Give time on your terms, wean away from clinging but spend more quality time together.

Children of all ages enjoy simple comforters; it can be a photograph, a simple object chosen from the 'memories box', a personal item or a preferred piece of clothing.

Communication is crucial. Find time to share your feelings—bed time or bath times are often good relaxing time together. Even if they have not had bedtime stories for some time, it is often a good idea to return to this simple routine.

### **Sleep problems**

Decide on some simple rules and routines with your child, for example: bedtimes, reading times, what you will do if they wake during the night, when they come in to see you in the morning.

Some parents have found the use of a 'warm pack' helps—these can be purchased in a variety of shapes and warmed in the microwave—but do take care to check that it is not too hot when placed in the bed. Build in some time together and try to avoid excitement or stimulation just before bedtime, from such things as playing on the computer or watching unsuitable television programmes.

Simple things, such as nightlights and soft music played at bedtime can often be helpful. Stories, especially the favourite ones they like to hear over and over again, have a very important place. A good story teller can have children on the edge of their seats, or have them asleep in minutes and dreaming nice things.

If a child is disturbed by unpleasant dreams, encourage talking them through. Sharing can dispel the disturbing content.

Be wary of allowing them to share your bed—it can become a habit and create tensions on the return of your partner.

Some changes in sleep patterns amongst older children may be more about changes in their body clock and hormones. It is not unusual for long periods of sleep and late nights to become the norm. Many popular soft drinks contain caffeine or other stimulants and also prolonged use of a computer can affect the chance of a good night sleep.

### **Tearfulness**

Tears are associated with the expression of all kinds of emotions; sadness, anger, ecstatic laughter, frustration, disappointment.

When children become tearful it is distressing for parents, especially when we think we know why they are unhappy or what may be the cause. Children need to be reassured that tears are 'okay' and that grown-ups cry too.

Children are often embarrassed by their tearfulness and will want to be able to control it for themselves. It helps to think of it as a habit we get into when we feel upset; habits like that can be hard to break, especially if others react promptly with affection and comfort every time we start to feel tearful. That can make it harder for us to manage how we feel.

Children all learn to deal with their emotions in different ways and it is important that they should. As adults it is fine to give expression to our sensitivity, but not to be handicapped by it; just as it is not helpful to be a slave to other strong emotions within ourselves.

Children in most schools learn how to recognise and manage their emotions; your child's school will be able to tell you more about this.

### **Withdrawn behaviour**

Sometimes children become quieter and tend to opt out of the things for which they would normally show more interest. They may become more remote and seek time alone rather than want company or spend time with the family.

When this happens in a younger child it is usually a sign that something is playing on the child's mind; it helps if they are able to talk, usually it is temporary. At times like this the younger child may yearn for the feelings of comfort and protection they felt when much smaller, to be scooped up and cuddled if they felt fearful.

Often children find it easier to share their worries with someone other than their parent; it may be a family friend, a relative or a teacher, a school nurse or some other professional. Think of these people as your safety net. If you are in the habit of spending regular quality time together you will tend to pick things up early, but not always.

For the older child, make sure they know that if something is troubling them they can choose how to seek help or advice and there is a range of professional people they can talk to. Most of them know how to deal with 'secrets' that may be worrying the child—the teenage years are quite predictable.

If in doubt always speak to your child's teacher; he/she will see how your child is in school and will be able to offer advice. Schools also have full access to a network of professionals that you might like to speak to.

With sensible support from parents, most children and young people do learn to adapt. These experiences and how they cope with them are important in later life as adults. Children that learn to cope with simple life transitions from an early age are better equipped to face the challenges of life as adults.

### **Some suggestions**

Let them be aware that children are never too old to have cuddles, and neglected teddies that get left in the cupboard feel lonely from time-to-time.

Try to find opportunity to play alongside and to 'be a child again'. Being very silly together can be a valuable means of releasing feelings and opening up communication. Use of puppets and other toys can be very helpful. Sometimes a child will talk 'through' a puppet in ways that they would not directly.

Sometimes younger children are more responsive to ‘silent friends’—maybe a comforter or a teddy; ‘Teddy’s looking a bit sad/fed up...’; ‘What do you think happened? What do you think he/she would say?’

Older children often just require space and time—maybe a lot of space and time—being able to talk with the parent who has deployed may help.

## Keeping in touch

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Staying in touch with the parent who has deployed is very important.



### Letters

The best letters are ‘daily blogs’. They are chatty, cheerful, full of news about life’s routine; ‘Guess what happened in ‘favourite TV programme’; describing how young children have grown, how the ‘team’ is doing etc.

‘Hi Dad... Mum’s cooking dinner... I’m fine... too much homework... Love you...’

Including young children’s hand and foot prints, drawings, newspaper cuttings and photographs can add to the enjoyment when the letter is received.

Young people say that having the last letter you received in front of you and sometimes a photograph, often helps when writing letters. It also helps to make sure you have answered any questions asked.

Consider numbering your letters. It helps if the mail becomes delayed and letters arrive out of sequence.

Sharing what you have written in your letters with your children helps them to know what to say. It also helps you to know what they have said.

### Email

Email is quicker than sending a letter. You can either compose your message online or offline. Keep your message short.

‘I did this today... I had a great... A nice thing happened...’

Reread your message carefully—the risk of making mistakes increases when you type it—make sure that any humour you use can not be misinterpreted.

## Telephone calls

Telephone calls can be an excellent way to bridge the distance between the parent who has deployed and the family. They can also be a source of tension.

There are often queues for telephones in ‘theatre’. Try to arrange a pattern of times when you can talk on the telephone and make sure that the telephone is kept free. Don’t forget if you are not using broadband, using the internet blocks the telephone line.

Time goes quickly—think what to say—some things are better in a letter or email. Keep the conversation two-way. Young children can be unpredictable during telephone calls—often eager to speak prior to the actual call, but freezing into silence during the call and then becoming upset because they didn’t speak.

These ideas have worked for others

- ★ Just saying ‘hello’ and ‘bye’, ‘love you’ means a lot
- ★ Rehearsing what they want to say—if they freeze—you can prompt or even offer to say it for them. Hearing their works can often help them unfreeze
- ★ Recording their message and letting them play the message down the telephone. Children can record their messages when they want during the week and play it back during the telephone call

## How schools can help

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Schools help by providing children with

- ★ A regular and familiar routine
- ★ A social network
- ★ A source of reliable information
- ★ A support network



School also keeps them active and in a ‘haven of normality’ in their changed world, helping them to deal with difficult emotions and promote positive thinking.

### School attendance

Avoid the temptation to change schools or keep children out of school. Absence disrupts their routine and may weaken friendships—hindering social development—and make it difficult for them to keep up with school work.

If there is a reason to request special leave, discuss it with your child’s teacher and check to see what is on the school calendar prior to making any firm arrangements.

## Rest and recuperation (R&R)

A period of rest and recuperation (R&R) is granted to each serving member who has been deployed, although this is dependent upon the length of the tour and local military requirements.



R&R can be a period of great joy. For the person deployed it is a period away from 'theatre' and time with the family; time to 'chill' and have 'down time'. The family is also looking forward to reunion and time together.

For some families it can also be a time of tension. Last minute changes to travel arrangements can cause delays (even cancellation) of R&R; travel time may add restrictions.

- ★ You need to plan ahead to ensure that it is a restorative and mutually positive event
- ★ Keep it as simple quality time together and do not expect too much of each other
- ★ Keep up the family routines, but be flexible
- ★ Relax and avoid rushed outings, job-lists, sudden influxes of visitors, or making changes

## End of tour—homecoming and reunion

The end of the tour and homecoming of the deployed parent is often a long awaited, exciting time. It is also a time of further change and can be challenging or even stressful.



Everyone in the family will have experienced the separation differently and many things will have happened. It is natural for those anticipating homecoming to have mixed emotions ★ happy ★ excited ★ uncertain ★ worried ★ anxious ★ proud ★ apprehensive.

*You must remember that the deployed parent and the parent who stayed at home and the children, will all have changed and developed in some way.*

### Preparing for the reunion

Preparing children for the return of Dad/Mum will help them adjust. Things that can be useful include

- ★ Talking about Dad/Mum's return so that they have time to think and get used to their feelings about the reunion. Answer their questions and be patient if they repeat them

- ★ Encouraging your children to think about how it might take time for everyone to get used to being together again. Assure them it is okay to be excited and nervous about what it will be like to have Dad/Mum home
- ★ Involving your children in the reunion preparations. They might want to do something special like make a banner, card or gift. They could also send a letter, video, photograph or hand/foot prints before Dad/Mum returns, so they can tell/show how they have grown and changed. The deployed parent could send a recent photograph back to the children too
- ★ Preparing children for how things may be different when Dad/Mum returns. Talk about ways to get the returning parent back into the family routines. Plan some favourite activities that your children can do—like having special time alone with the returning parent. You could also plan some activities for the whole family, but try not to over-schedule the first few days after their return. Remind the children that Dad/Mum might be tired when they get home after all that travelling.

As the reunion gets closer, be prepared for excitement similar to that prior to a birthday. Try to maintain routines and sleep patterns as much as possible. Remind children that Dad/Mum wants to be home on a certain day, but it is possible that they might be delayed—but it is not their parent’s fault if they are late.

### How will my children respond?

Individual reactions vary widely, according to temperament and personality. It is helpful to be aware that re-establishing relationships takes time. Very young children may not recognise the returning parent and need to adjust to this ‘new’ person. Even slightly older children may be wary at first, but recognition is easier from about five years onwards.

Age	Possible response
12+	Excited, but self-conscious—not cool to let it show—likely to have changed most—uncertain—rebellious—independent—mature Runs to—dominates conversation—might worry—excitable
5	Attention seeking—pushes the boundaries—tests for and needs reassurance
3	Unsure—tend to cling to those they know—but returning parent ‘feels’ familiar
1	Unsure—may react to parent as a stranger—may become distressed

★ Infants up to 12 months

Will not yet have developed much of their ability to remember people and events; their recollection will be vague and they may not recognise the returning parent. They may well react to the returning parent as a stranger—crying, pulling away, fussing and clinging to the person who has been their primary carer during the deployment.

Be patient and let your baby set the pace of the reunion. Children are naturally inquisitive; familiarity is assured if the new person becomes part of routine activities together, such as bathing, feeding and changing.

★ Toddlers age 1 to 3

Might typically respond to the returning parent by hiding or clinging to the person who has been their primary carer during deployment. The returning parent needs to reintroduce themselves to the toddler—remaining within easy reach of the primary carer, talking in a reassuring voice and lowering themselves to the toddler's eye level. Joining in with family routines—bathing, bedtime stories and playing games together—all help speed up acceptance by the toddler. It could also help to show pictures of the returning parent a few weeks before they return and mention them more in conversation.

★ Pre-school age 3 to 5

Still tend to have unusual ideas about cause and effect and think that their thoughts and feelings influence events in the world around them. A child may think their feelings or actions caused the deployed parent to go away. Fears or imagined thoughts of what could happen can easily get blown out of proportion and be very upsetting for them. Children of this age often express sadness through anger and may 'reject' the parent on occasions—protecting themselves from further distress—whilst on other occasions 'testing the limit' of their parents tolerance as they try to establish which family rules still apply.

It is important that the child sees both parents working as a team—the returning parent taking a lead from the primary carer by supporting and following their disciplinary stance and both noticing and encouraging positive behaviour. The returning parent can help the readjustment process by being active in the child's life—talking with them, reading to them and playing their games.

★ School age 5 to 12

Children's reaction to reunion may be dependent on a number of things. It may have a lot to do with how they think their behaviour will be viewed by the returning parent.

Those who feel secure in their parent's affections may well run up excitedly and give a very warm welcome. Some are inclined to try to monopolise attention and talk almost non-stop. Some may be uncertain, shy, withdrawn or even fear the return of a parent.

The primary carer can help the reunion by reassuring the child of their parents love and excitement at being together again. Misdemeanours have to be addressed, but not dwelled upon; more important are the lessons to be learned and what can be done to make amends.

★ Adolescence age 13 to 18

If you have a teenager in your family, then you will probably be fully aware of the roller-coaster of emotions that are part of growing up. They may be excited about their parent's return, but children in this age group have often changed the most.

If they have enjoyed more freedom and accepted greater responsibility for their own lives, they may be uncertain whether there will be a loss of this independence with the family reunited. They can be acutely sensitive about their appearance, and a sensible parent will think before commenting. They might hold back or feel uncomfortable about expressing their feelings openly in public, so be aware of this and allow space to talk individually and exchange welcome hugs in private. Find time to discuss what is happening in their lives and share their news.

### Adjusting back to family life

Remember that reunion is more than just a single event, it is a process of readjustment and like all processes, it will take time. Readjustment to life together may last four to six weeks—although some families will adjust more quickly and others will require longer. It is also possible that members of the family will adjust at different rates.

Things that can help make a difference include

- ★ Accepting that changes have occurred
- ★ Working as a team and trying to adjust slowly
- ★ Making time for each other
- ★ Being proud of, and celebrating, everyone's successes

