



# How to Help Military & Veteran Families

FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

## Before, During and After Deployment

Now more than ever, infants and toddlers are spending some portion of their day with adults other than their parents. During times of stress, caregivers can provide an emotional safety net for young children by offering ongoing support, love and guidance that children need in order to feel safe during times of change.<sup>1</sup> Based on their age, gender, experiences and developmental levels, children respond differently to deployment and separation from a parent. Research shows that children five and younger may display increased behavioral problems during deployment and increased clinginess or separation anxiety at reunion compared with children whose parents had not experienced a recent deployment.<sup>2</sup> Caregivers' responses to children experiencing deployment play a critical role in helping children build skills to cope with the trauma and stress they may be experiencing.

Working with very young children comes with unique challenges due to their limited vocabulary and inability to identify and manage their own emotions. Researchers say that changes in behavior are to be expected and may include anger, sadness, feelings of abandonment, anxiety, increased aggression, withdrawal, and confusion.<sup>3</sup> The consistent presence of a caring adult expands opportunities to help the entire family through the changes that come with deployment.

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## Did you know?

- » There are more than 1.2 million children with parents serving on active duty, and 42.6 percent are between birth and five years old. In total, there are more than 743,000 children with parents in the National Guard or Reserves. Of these 58.5 percent are younger than 11 years.<sup>4</sup>
- » As of March 2013, more than 50,550 American service members had been wounded in action and more than 6,650 had lost their lives in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn. More than 44,700 children experienced a deployed parent's wounding, injury, illness or death. Of these children, almost half were elementary school-aged children; one in four children were five years or younger.<sup>5</sup>
- » Each deployment-related family separation is unique. Circumstances associated with a given separation can be significant factors for a child's successful coping with parental deployment.<sup>6</sup>
- » Infants and toddlers communicate stress through increased aggression, regression, sleep changes, withdrawal, whining or crying, and clinginess.<sup>7</sup>

# Practical Applications

## WHEN WORKING WITH PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

- On enrollment paperwork, ask families if they are a military or veteran family.
- Remind them of the importance of maintaining routine, consistency and structure for their children during deployments or other stressful times.
- Encourage them to take care of themselves so that they can take better care of their children. That means getting plenty of exercise, sleep and healthy food.
- Be proactive in maintaining close communication with parents and guardians to anticipate first signs of stress in children, such as behavioral problems in peer relationships, unexplained mood changes, tearfulness or irritability, or worsening of previously-existing behavioral problems.
- Have resources available for parents and guardians who may be experiencing military-related issues with their children.
- Remind parents and guardians to take care of themselves during stressful times by using respite care programs such as Child Care Aware's "Give Army Parents a Break."



## WHEN WORKING WITH INFANTS

- Establish a secure and trusting relationship. Infants need to be surrounded by people they trust to build healthy relationships in the future.
- Help deployed or separated parents to be part of the child's day by encouraging families to provide pictures, voice recordings or other personal items to help maintain connections.
- Maintain routines to allow for consistency. When everything else is changing in an infant's life, routines create a sense of security.
- Watch for signs of stress exhibited by the parent or guardian at home. Infants mirror the feelings of the important adults in their lives.

## WHEN WORKING WITH TODDLERS

- If toddlers become agitated or disruptive, remain calm and patient. Their behavior could be in response to stress or insecurity they are feeling in other areas of their lives.
- Maintain daily routines. Toddlers like to know what comes next.
- Keep reminders of the deployed parent present with pictures in a sturdy frame or ironed on a pillow to help bridge the miles between child and parent.
- Expect some regression, such as lapses in potty training. This is a normal response. Work with the child's parent or guardian at home to grow through these setbacks.
- Do not be afraid to talk about the absent parent with the child. This will reassure the child that their parent is thinking of them too.



## WHEN WORKING WITH PRESCHOOLERS

- Help children express emotions in positive ways. Give them words to help them describe what they are feeling.
- Provide opportunities to express feelings through play.
- Display and read books that relate to parental separation.
- Listen to children's fears and concerns. Reassurance that the deployed parent is working hard and loves them is important.
- Set clear expectations and limits. Children will attempt to test boundaries. It is important that they feel secure in familiar routines and know that the adult will protect them.

## Additional Resources

Helping young children navigate through stressful experiences like separation from a parent can be challenging. Educating child care staff members is vital to the overall well-being and development

of each child. Resources are available to assist in helping children with experiences related to military life. The most important resource is the child's parent or guardian at home; however, there are many websites designed to provide additional information about how child care providers can help military families.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *American Academy of Pediatrics, Support for Military Children & Adolescents*, [www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment](http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment)
- » *Child Care Aware of America, Military Families*, [www.naccrra.org/military-families](http://www.naccrra.org/military-families)
- » *Defense Centers of Excellence: Children of Military Service Members Resource Guide*, [www.dcoe.health.mil/Content/Navigation/Documents/DCoE%20Children%20of%20Military%20Service%20Members%20Resource%20Guide.pdf](http://www.dcoe.health.mil/Content/Navigation/Documents/DCoE%20Children%20of%20Military%20Service%20Members%20Resource%20Guide.pdf)
- » *Educator's Guide to the Military Child During Deployment*, [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/homefront/homefront.pdf)
- » *Military Child Education Coalition*, [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)
- » *Military OneSource*, [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)
- » *National Military Family Association*, [www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)
- » *Sesame Street Workshop's Talk, Listen, Connect*, [www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/our-initiatives/military-families.html](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/our-initiatives/military-families.html)
- » *ZERO TO THREE*, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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## About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



## About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

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1404 West State Street • West Lafayette, Ind. 47907-2092 • 765-496-3403

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United States Department of Agriculture  
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MILITARY FAMILY  
ASSOCIATION  
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## SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT REVIEWERS

Taran Schneider, CLASS Mentor Coach Specialist – Child Care Aware of Minnesota & Head Start  
Julia Yeary, Director of Training & Resources – ZERO TO THREE

## NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION VOLUNTEER REVIEWERS

Christine Gallagher, Kelly Hruska, Christina Jumper, Tiffany O'Sheal, Claire Lyn Saxon

## RESEARCH REFERENCES

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