

Adolescence and Military Deployment

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As military members face longer and more frequent deployments, family members are working hard to provide a loving and supportive environment. With the length of deployment averaging 12 months, the repeated process of separation and reunion can be a struggle for not only significant others but also for military children. Children experience deployment differently than adults. A child's age, developmental level, experiences and relationships all influence how a child will respond to the deployment of a parent.

For adolescents (12 to 17 years old), the normal stressors of development along with the added stressors of parental deployment can be overwhelming. Support for adolescents facing parental deployment is a critical issue for mental health professionals and military families. Below, you will find information regarding the mixed challenges of adolescent development and parental deployment.

Adolescent Development

People often think of the teenage years as a time of emotional turmoil and dramatic behavior. Although these stereotypes can indeed be true, they do not characterize the majority of adolescents. A typical teen struggles for independence and demands more responsibility and freedom for their personal choices. It is not uncommon for teens to experiment with new ways to dress or wear their hair. They may start listening to different music and spend more time with friends than family. They may even assert themselves to authority figures as a way to test their limits.

Teenagers' preoccupations with identity formation—trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in—can be stressful and confusing, especially in the early teenage years. Therefore, it is important for parents to remember that a teenager is halfway between being a child and an adult and that they still depend upon parents for emotional support, stability and guidance.

Most teens eventually reach a point of interdependence. Interdependence occurs when parents and adolescents are able to rely on one another. An interdependent teen realizes that some of life's activities and

challenges are too difficult to tackle alone and recognizes the need of another individual—ideally a supportive parent, mentor or caregiver.

Adolescence is also characterized by self-regulation. Self-regulation is a teen's ability to control his or her behavior. Teens learn by example. Therefore, it is important for parents to include a teen in decision making when appropriate. Such inclusion helps promote a teenager's development into a mature and independent-thinking adult. Adolescence is also a time for parents to help build teens' confidence, to encourage new things, to pick them up after failure, to support them through challenges and to praise their successes. Learning by example influences how a teen self-regulates, which is an important part of establishing healthy emotional

Adolescents often feel conflicted during deployment. They may feel:

- Nervous**
- Worried**
- Confused**
- Mad**
- Lonely**
- Isolated**
- Sad**
- Afraid**
- Shocked**
- Proud**

expression, and it can help prevent alcohol and drug abuse.

How Adolescents Experience Deployment

Prior to deployment, teens might distance themselves from or become angry with the deploying parent. Some teens might experience a delayed reaction and become upset after the parent leaves. Teens can benefit from talking about the deployment with the deployed parent prior to leaving. It is important for teens to have positive outlets where they can continue to discuss their feelings while the parent is away.

It is also important to listen to a teenager's feelings and opinions, even if they are different from a parent's. Sometimes teens' feelings change, or they experience conflicted emotions when a parent is deployed. For example, adolescents may feel not only proud of their parents' service but also fearful or angry that their parents might not return safely.

Deployment, like many other life events and transitions, can cause not only positive and negative emotions but also stress. Some stressors we can predict. This type of stressor is called a normative stressor. It includes the predictable stressors that come with puberty, entering/leaving school, moving away from home for the first time or starting a new a job.



There are also stressors that we cannot predict. These are called non-normative stressors; they are not a “normal” part of family life. Non-normative stressors include marital or relationship distress, chronic disease, injury, death and even military deployment. Deployment is not predictable because it is not a normal event that families expect to experience.

After deployment, the reunion process can also be a stressful experience for adolescents. Many teens express concerns about being able to recognize their deployed parent. Some adolescents also worry about reintegrating a deployed parent into the new routines that were established while their parent was away. Finally, teens have concerns that a deployed parent will not recognize the developmental changes that have taken place.

While service members have a lot to think about in regard to their teenagers, it is also important that teenagers and other family members display patience with the service member as he or she reintegrates with the family.

What Parents Can Do

Prior to deployment

- Explain what the parent being deployed will be doing
- Share your own concerns about the deployment
- Reassure adolescents that the parent being deployed will do everything they can to return home
- Educate teens on the signs and symptoms of depression

During deployment

- Help adolescents become aware of emotions they are feeling
- Let teens know that conflicted feelings are okay
- Emphasize that it is okay not to feel strong—sadness and frustration are not a sign of weakness
- Educate teens on the signs and symptoms of depression
- Encourage adolescents to develop ways to share their experiences with the deployed parent

After deployment

- Talk about the changes in roles and responsibilities since the parent has been deployed

- Discuss the need for patience with the deployed parent
- Encourage the teen to talk to the parent about the changes that have occurred
- Involve teens in groups that include children with similar experiences

Further Reading for Adolescents

A Nation Challenged: A visual history of 9/11 and its aftermath (2002). Young Readers Edition, ed. Nancy Lee, Lonnie Schlein and Mitchel Levitas. New York: New York Times/Callaway.

Denkmire, Heather. *The truth about fear and depression* (2009), ed. Mark J. Kittleson. New York: Facts on File.

Sherman, Michelle D., and DeAnne M. Sherman (2005). *Finding my way: A teen's guide to living with a parent who has experienced trauma*. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press.

Further Information

Military Family Research Institute, Purdue University, www.mfri.purdue.edu.

American Academy of Pediatrics, <http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/index.html>.

4-H Military Partnerships, www.4-hmilitarypartnerships.org.

National Military Family Association, www.nmfa.org.

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