



A Battle Plan for Military Children's Mental Wellness

Part 1: Setting Up Your Family to Win

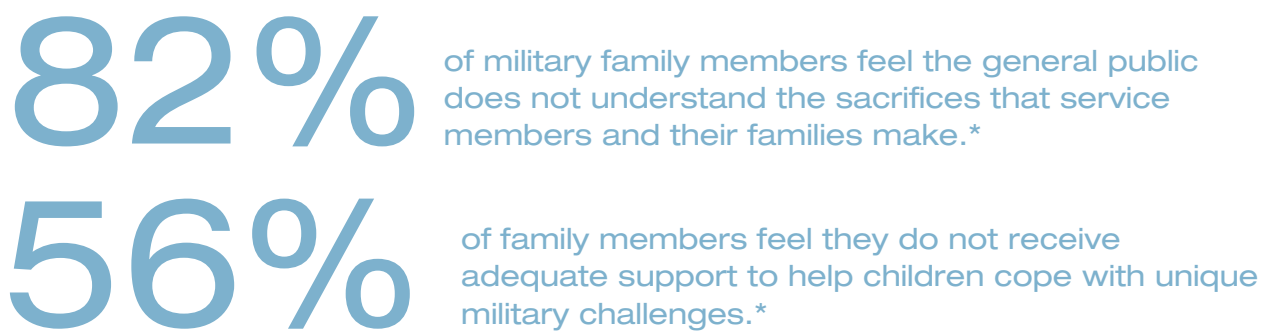




Introduction.....	3
One front: Creating healthy couple communication that even benefits your children	4
The impact of parental tensions on kids: Staying co-parents together.....	5
The importance of parental self-care	8
Setting up good communication with your children.....	13
Correcting and redirecting your child	16
Family organization: Introducing a proven strategy.....	17
Fostering healthy habits for your children	22
Closing words	28
Checklist: How is your family set-up to win?	31



The military lifestyle is not easy. Military families move almost three times more often than other families, experience constant transitions to new jobs and locations, and deal with deployments, injuries, and mental health issues more than your civilian counterparts. As parents, you want to be sure your children have the resources they need to manage emotional challenges that come up along the way.



Creating a solid, stable household for your family helps you better prepare for challenges that come with military life. When you have well-established routines and expectations, and effective communications that include setting boundaries and having consistent consequences, you're giving your family a strong foundation.

This handbook is designed in two parts to help with all of those things. The starting point for mental wellness is solid family relationships. Whether you're part of a dual-parent household or a single parent, family relationships take work, and there are some ways to set yourself up for success. The following are some good practices that will help you do so.

The second part of this handbook will discuss specific ways you can prepare for major military life changes, such as moves and deployments, for the best possible outcomes for your children and family. It will be available for free at www.1in5minds.org. There, you might also reference the Military Parents Guide to Children's Mental Health for more details and resources for your child's mental and emotional wellness. If you find yourself stuck, please don't be afraid to reach out for help.

* The 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle survey



One Front: Creating healthy couple communication that even benefits your children

Healthy communication is the foundation to all of our relationships, yet is often cited as being one of the most challenging tasks in our intimate relationships. Investing the time to improve or maintain a solid communication system does not only benefit you and your significant other, but also improves co-parenting while modeling important skills to your children. Here are some strategies that you can use to be on one front with your partner.

Learn to speak in a way that lets you be heard

An important strategy when expressing yourself is phrasing your thoughts in, “I statements.” There are three essential elements to these statements. The first is starting the sentence with, “I” so that the focus is on you, thereby decreasing the likelihood of the other person becoming

defensive. The next step is to focus on the emotional effect that you experience, so that you are able to own your feelings and reflects your self-awareness. The last step is to end with the behavior that brings about this emotional experience.

Examples of, “I statements” are: I feel frustrated when the trash isn’t taken out when it is full; I feel unimportant when you are on your phone while we are having family dinner; I feel sad when you don’t text me goodnight when you are traveling for work. Speaking in this way may feel unusual at first, but it allows each person to take ownership of his or her feelings and thoughts, while calmly exploring the impact of the behavior.

Listen so that the message sent is also the same message being received

Active listening is a much harder skill than we give it credit. It sometimes feels like second nature to jump in and interrupt, or quickly defend yourself with all examples of contrary evidence. Resist this urge and stay attentive to what is being shared. When your partner is done sharing, reflect back the message that you received with paraphrases and check for understanding. Statements such as: I heard you say that you feel . . . and; If I understand you correctly, you feel . . . help you ensure that you heard the words and the meaning before going any further.

Brainstorm before you problem solve

If a solution needs to be offered and found, then work together to brainstorm several possible ideas first before ruling out options. Create a list including the many ways that a problem (for example: the trash being taken to the curb on trash day) could be tackled, and then categorize into highly possible (+), maybe possible (/), and not very possible (-). This could look like:

Problem:

Taking out the trash

Possible Solutions:

- Set a reoccurring phone reminder (+)
- Place a post-it note on the garage door the night before (/)
- Assign the chore to the kids (/)
- Move where we keep the bins to be closer to the street all the time (-)

¹ Pedro, M., Ribeiro, T., & Shelton, K. (2015). Romantic Attachment and Family Functioning: The Mediating Role of Marital Satisfaction. *Journal Of Child & Family Studies*, 24(11), 3482-3495. doi:10.1007/s10826-015-0150-6

The impact of parental tensions on kids:

Staying co-parents together

There are many common challenges in marriages such as communication, money, differing interests, and work/life imbalance. As these areas begin to strain and even break down, couples often have difficulty remaining teammates playing for their relationship and instead end up competing against one another. Divisions and discord in your relationship do not merely impact your life satisfaction, but also have the ability to impact others around you (e.g., your children).

Regular fighting may cause your children to feel uneasy at home, or be confused. This can affect their self-esteem, their sense of responsibility for their parent's happiness, academic and behavioral functioning at school, and their ability to problem-solve well in their present and future relationships. It is also likely that parents who are unhappy are less present in their parenting role and more likely to leave the child in the middle of the tension, like a triangle.¹

When you notice that your relationship is suffering, invest in working on it for the sake of yourself, your relationship, and your children. This may include revisiting healthy communication tools that have fallen to the wayside and setting aside time to practice sometime during the day. Or it may require the commitment to seek professional help through a marriage retreat, or couples or family therapy.

As you are investing in decreasing the conflicts in your relationship, remember that no matter your marital status with your partner, it is important to strive to remain effective co-parents. As a practical military family example, in times of marital discord while the service member is deployed or on temporary duty, effective co-parents maintain open lines of communication with each other, as well as between the children and parents, and allow for regular phone and video calls. The ability to come together for the kids and maintain those important parenting roles may help you find a goal that places you back on the same team, rather than in competition.

Incorporating new techniques into your daily routines is hard, and remembering to phrase your sentences in, “I statements” is tough when you are in the middle of feeling a lot of emotions. To give yourselves the best chance at improving your communication in times of tension, practice these skills when things are going well. Consider this practice like participating in a fire drill. You are more likely to know your

escape plan during an emergency if you have experience with the route without extreme stress.

One way that you can practice these skills is to set a time each day (or at least three to four times a week) to share about your day for 15 minutes while incorporating these techniques. That time may look something like this:

Spouse A:

I felt stressed today when Taylor’s school called saying that he was sick. I didn’t know how I would get my deadline met at work and leave quickly enough so he wasn’t sitting in the nurse’s office too long feeling crummy.

Spouse B:

I hear you sharing that it was stressful to have that interruption at work from your big project, and you wanted to be there for Taylor at the same time.

Another way that you can practice is to use, “I statements” to share positive affirmations with each other when your partner does something helpful or nice. It will likely still require some work to remember at first to use this language, but it should be easier than trying to reach for the words for the first time during a time of hurt or anger.

Examples may include:

- I felt loved when you left a post-it note for me on the mirror.
- I felt heard when you took over bath time with the kids when I said that I was stressed.
- I felt appreciated when you said thank you and kissed me after I put gas in the car.

When we communicate better, everyone has a better chance at being heard, understood, and taken seriously. Focusing on how behaviors impact your emotions allows space for individual experiences and opens up a space for collaboration around problems, rather than competition about who’s right and who’s wrong. The more you practice and intentionally use healthy communication strategies, the more likely you are to find better solutions with your partner. Then, experience the effects of these skills on your relationships with other family members, your children, your coworkers, and friends. Healthy communication benefits everyone.



Share expectations and manage them **together**

Military families often hear the phrase: expectation management. When one of you is a service member, there are many day-to-day and long-term factors that are often up in the air: what time you'll get home from work; when the family will move next; how long the next field exercise will last; the number of work calls that will come in during the night.

The military can be a hard environment in which to have expectations at all, because many aspects of your life are often changing and out of your control. Sometimes, the term, "expectation management" is used as a blanket statement to shut down any expectations that you or your partner may have, but that is neither helpful nor a feasible solution. We all have some level of expectations and needs, and ignoring them is not productive.

Find time and space to use healthy communication skills and share with each other what your expectations are of each other and as they relate to parenting as a military family. For example, a couple may be fighting regularly

about missed family dinner times and the long work hours required in the service member's new position.

When the expectations are broken down to the basics, the homefront parent may have the desire to receive a text letting them know if their partner/spouse is now unlikely to be home in time for dinner due to work. The service member may have the wish that their partner/spouse has greater understanding for the flexibility needed for the job and the inability to simply leave when Retreat plays at 1700 hours. This couple may be able to find common ground and realistic solutions that meet their expectations, while appreciating their unique needs and positions.

Rather than shutting out all expectations, communicate together about what each person can control as it pertains to actions and thoughts, in order to lead to a better emotional outcome for everyone. Managing your expectations together and meeting your needs as a couple can help you better navigate the many uncertainties that coincide with your military service.

The importance of **parental self-care:**

Ways to make sure parents get “refilled”

The notion of self-care for parents seems to be at odds with the values in our society around putting our children (and everyone else for that matter) first, as well as military values pertaining to selfless service. However, in the long run, if parents do not take care of themselves, there will not be much left to give to your children. It is even more critical if you're a single parent, which means you may need to lean harder on a support system, or work to build a stronger one. No family should go it all alone. Work to assemble and leverage support systems including friends, neighbors, teachers, professionals, and other members of your military community network to help along the way.

Think about the last time that you were on an airplane. The safety briefing included instructions to secure your oxygen mask before helping children and others. Why do we have

to be reminded of this every single time we wait to take off? It is almost instinctual for us to take care of our children first. But that reminder is so necessary because if you are not supplied with your own oxygen, you will not be much help to anyone else.

Self-care is important for both homefront and service member parents. It refills your tank so that you have more resources available to handle everyday life and the stressors that arise. Self-care is different from stress management, in that self-care is a preventative measure, and stress management is reactive. Both are important for everyone, but with increased focus on self-care, you may be able to prevent how stressed you become in the face of parenting, family, and military life challenges.



We are all unique people, and what one considers being a self-care activity greatly varies. Here is a helpful acronym from the Strong Parents Self-Care Program (Blankenship, 2015) that can help break self-care into seven important categories¹:

RESPECT

R

Recreational

Examples: board games, TV shows/movies, reading, crafts, playing a musical instrument

E

Emotional

Examples: journaling, conversations with important people in your life, giving yourself praise and positive affirmations, finding things that make you laugh, allowing time and space to cry

S

Spirituality

Examples: time spent at a place of worship, reading scripture, devotionals, and/or other religious or inspirational literature, spending time in prayer and/or meditation, spending time in nature, allowing yourself to be reflective

P

Physical

Examples: getting enough sleep, eating healthy, exercise, outdoor walks, playing sports, making time for medical appointments (to include preventative care), taking time for physical intimacy with yourself and/or your partner, getting massages

E

Employment and Educational

Examples: leaving work on time, saying no sometimes to extra responsibilities, engaging in the activities that you love most about your work, sign up for a class that interests you at a local college or online, volunteer for a cause that you are passionate about, listen to podcasts that strike your interest and foster learning

C

Community

Examples: spending time with others whose company you enjoy, having friends over for dinner or a game night, going to a community event and meeting people, staying in contact with important family and friends

T

Tasks

Examples: preparing a meal, organizing a cluttered space, washing the car, completing errands like grocery shopping, cleaning, meal prepping for the week, gardening, creating lists and reminders

¹ Blankenship, A. E. (2015). *Strong parents*. Unpublished manuscript.

As you read through the categories of self-care, you will likely find two or three domains that are most important to you, and possibly one area that is not as valued. Within the individual examples, some may even sound like the absolute opposite of self-care to you. That is because your self-care journey is supposed to be very personalized; running five miles or cleaning the house is self-care to some but others may loathe it. Notice also that these categories can overlap: attending a weekly Protestant Women of the Chapel group could be considered spiritual, emotional, and community.

It's important for both partners to respect each other's needs for self-care. Be sure you're actively supporting your partner's self-care time, and modeling this priority for your children, as well. Keep in mind that while self-care is personalized, it's not always limited to solitary endeavors. You can also look for self-care activities you and your partner can sometimes enjoy together. For example, take tennis lessons together, or tackle a relaxing gardening project, if that speaks to both of you.



Take some time to walk through these steps and set a goal or two. You deserve it, and your children deserve it. Apps with activity and mood trackers can also be helpful to keep you and/or your partner on track for self-care.

Here is one more helpful acronym from ZERO TO THREE (2007) that can help you incorporate more intentional and regular self-care into your life²:

CARE

Consider your needs

C

Think about everything that you have going on in your life, and consider what categories of self-care may be most helpful for you to focus in on. What activities give you energy, mental strength, and peace? This could change from week to week, or there may be a consistent need that keeps your tank filled with resources. A helpful way to figure out what you need is to track your daily activities and mood for five to seven days; then see how your time is spent. Take inventory and notice what stands out as areas you are strong in and areas that need more attention. Pick one or two needs that can be your goal for this week, such as going on a 30-minute walk on three days (physical) and journaling three things you are grateful for daily (emotional).

Arrange your schedule

A

The activity tracking that you did initially can be very helpful here to provide you more insight on how you budget your time. You may find obvious gaps in your day to arrange for self-care, or you may have to get more creative. Treat your self-care like an appointment and schedule in your phone or calendar; this will increase the likelihood that you follow through. You can even call these blocks of times appointments when other people try to negotiate for that time in your day. Taking care of yourself regularly and intentionally is important, and you are worthy of putting it in your schedule.

Resolve to follow through

R

Take a moment to consider if there could be any potential barriers to following through. For some it may be childcare, while for others it may be that a big work/school deadline might take up more time than anticipated in the coming days. An internal sense of guilt could also hold you back. Think ahead and try to troubleshoot so that you have the best chance to complete your important self-care goals.

Encouragement

E

Seek encouragement from those in your circle, and encourage others to do the same. Speak openly with your family about self-care and use this as a great opportunity to teach your children how important it is, so that they grow up taking care of themselves as well. Use your significant other or friend as an accountability partner to give you that extra push to follow through on your scheduled activities. Notice the influence of intentional self-care on your life and help encourage other friends to invest in themselves as well. A healthy sense of self and extra charge in that tank results in healthier parents, employees, service members, volunteers, friends, and more.

²ZERO TO THREE. (2007). *The importance of caring for yourself during times of military-related stress*. Retrieved from www.zerotothree.org/resources/35-the-importance-of-caring-for-yourself-during-periods-of-military-related-stress#downloads



Setting up good communication with your children

The starting point for mental wellness in your family lies in relationships. How you relate to each other is a dynamic that doesn't happen on its own. It takes work to establish and maintain quality relationships with people in your family. Just because you live under the same roof with each other doesn't automatically make your relationships strong. Whether you live in a dual-parent household, or you're at the helm as a single parent, family relationships take work. Set yourself up for success with some of these good practices designed with military families in mind.

You know special challenges that come with being a military family, including deployments, frequent moves, and different kinds of transitions. You also may have unexpected surprises along the way, like being assigned to move somewhere, and then seeing those plans change at the last minute. Curveballs like that hopefully don't happen often, but it's good to be prepared for when one comes at you. A good approach is to be prepared, and know you're not alone. Be open with your children about these kinds of things. This modeling will help show your children how to communicate. It will also encourage dialogue about hopes, fears, and frustrations that come with your military family situation, will help your family relationships grow stronger, and help your children communicate better, too.

As our children move through the world, they're always listening and observing. They take in everything. Although many (wonderful and well-intentioned) parents believe that their children are too young to be aware of or understand the many things happening around them, your children are paying attention. Even babies and toddlers know when something is going on.

For example, have you ever been surprised or embarrassed when your children repeated or copied something that you said or did when you thought it would be, "over their heads?" Or maybe you've had the experience of your child telling you

something, and you think, "How on earth did they learn that?" This is because your children listen and receive information before they can put it into words. And this tends to happen at a younger age than we think. This means that your job as parents is to be intentional about what and how you communicate with your children, which will shape how our children learn and understand the world around them.

Having good communication with children is important for all families, but is even more essential for families that experience frequent changes and transitions, such as military families. Without good communication, children are left to figure things out on their own, which can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and sometimes fear and anxiety. While this responsibility can sound scary at first, it's also exciting that you, as parents, have the opportunity to set your children up to feel safe, confident, and have a sense of control in their world. Below are some guidelines to help you set up optimal communication with your children.

Talk to your children about major family changes and decisions

Of course, children should not be given all of the information all of the time, nor would that be helpful. However, communicating with your children about things that will significantly affect them or other members of your family is important. This includes big things (Is Mom or Dad anticipating a deployment? Will there be an upcoming Permanent Change of Station? Expecting a new baby?), and little things (Will a current work task temporarily mean less hours at home? Are you deciding to change the family's eating habits?).

When talking about these things with your children, speak in simple terms and be reassuring but honest. Use developmentally attuned language, and make realistic or attainable promises with the assumption that your child will remember. For younger children, simple and concrete is

better. You can use activities like drawing, looking at pictures on the internet, or reading books about the subject to help you. Adolescents hear best through honest (but not overly detailed) discussion, space to ask questions, and reassurance that you are there to support them. Most importantly, children of all ages need to know that they will be protected and cared for and that you love them.

Set clear boundaries

Have regular discussions with your children about the rules and expectations of your family. Setting clear boundaries also means discussing the differences in the roles and expectations of each individual family member. In addition to discussions, find moments to model those rules and expectations for your children. Remember that good communication is not only about your words, but also your behaviors. When you set clear boundaries with your words and behaviors, you are creating a predictable environment for your children. Children in predictable environments know the general structure of their day. They know the rules of the home, and they know the consequences of following vs. not following the rules. Communicating clear boundaries helps your child

experience a sense of safety, and builds self-esteem as they learn to succeed and make you proud.

Use your active listening skills

Good communication is always a two-way street. In addition to giving your children simple and honest information, you must be present and listen to them. This includes listening to their opinions or reactions to family decisions or changes, as well as giving them opportunities to share what is going on in their world and how they are feeling about it. For our littlest ones who don't yet have words, active listening also means paying attention to their emotions and facial expressions, as well as changes in behavior, such as eating or sleeping habits, or changes in fussiness.

The next step in active listening is acknowledging or reflecting back what your child is communicating and validating their experiences. This might include a reflective statement such as, "I can understand why you would feel angry that..." or letting your child know that it's okay to feel their emotions, whatever they may be. Active listening doesn't mean that you always give children what they want. Instead, active listening communicates to your children that they are heard and they are valued members of the family.





Provide affirmations

For most of us, it's often easier to catch our children misbehaving than behaving. That's because, for example, sitting quietly is much less attention grabbing than interrupting you when you are on the phone. This is why it is important to "catch" your children being good as often as possible. Every time you notice your child following your family's rules, values, or expectations, let them know that you noticed and that you are proud. For example, if one of your family's values is persistence, then provide lots of praise when your child participates in a t-ball game all the way through, even though they struggled. If they sat quietly through church, let them know that you noticed and you appreciate how they were sitting quietly. Most importantly, let them know that you love them, even when you are disappointed in their behaviors. Providing frequent and genuine affirmations to your children will set them up to be confident and have healthy self-esteem as they grow.

Discuss your family's identity and values

All families have an identity, made up of a shared culture and values. Military families may have certain values that

you want to pass on to your children. Other aspects of your family identity, such as your ethnicity or spirituality, may also guide the values that are important to discuss with your family. Have regular conversations with your children about the things that make up your family identity. For example, "What does it mean to be in a military family?" "What makes military families special, and what parts are difficult?" "What does Mom/Dad do when they deploy?"

For younger children, play together or use arts and crafts to facilitate the discussions. For example, you can draw pictures together or make a collage of different places you've lived (being in a military family means moving a lot!). Create a family "flag" together with pictures of all the things that represent your family. Read children's books about deployment. Take your children to military museums to see the, "trucks like the ones Mom/Dad drives." These discussions and activities will shape the way your children understand their world, and can help them develop a sense of pride in their family identity.

Correcting and redirecting your child

Children don't come with a manual. This is a common phrase for a reason. When it comes to correcting and redirecting your children, you may have noticed that, "one size does not fit all." Because children differ in the way that they best learn and understand information, some differences in approaches are needed for different children. However, there are some general practices that tend to be effective with most children.

For example, a general rule of thumb when correcting a child is to first help your child understand what the undesirable behavior is and why you are correcting them. For example, "It's against the rules to throw your toys. Throwing toys can hurt people." The next steps will depend on your child's age or development.

Children 2 years old and younger:

For our youngest children, the most effective next steps are to redirect your child. Show your child the appropriate behavior by modeling the appropriate behaviors or showing them the appropriate way to play with the object or toy. Do so in an excited way in order to teach them that this other behavior is one that you approve. As a last resort, you may also need to physically remove them from the situation or area.

Children 2 years old and older:

As children near the age of three, they are starting to learn the concepts of rules and self-control. We can help our children build these skills by providing consistent and developmentally appropriate consequences for negative behaviors. First, remind your child of what the consequence

will be if they continue that behavior. If the behavior continues, the next step is to follow through with that consequence. Consistency and follow-through is the key. Children should know exactly what would happen when they do and don't follow the rules. This is a good example of modeling clear boundaries.

It is also important to provide your child with an alternative appropriate behavior. Sometimes children do the "wrong" thing because they don't know what to do instead. You may also provide two options of acceptable behaviors. For example, "You can play inside with the toys gently, or you can throw the ball outside."

For typically developing children 3-7 years old, "time-out" is often a helpful strategy. See details on how to give the most effective time-out here. For older children, consequences may include removal of privileges, activities, or items for a limited time. Corporal punishment, such as spanking, is not recommended, because research has found it to be an ineffective form of punishment.¹

At the end of the consequence, be sure to give your child a chance to "fix" the problem by engaging in the appropriate behavior, and providing them with lots of praise after they follow through. The more consistent and age appropriate you are with your approach, the easier it will be for your child to learn the rules and develop self-control. They will build self-esteem as they make you proud.

¹ Smith, B. L. (2012). *The case against spanking: Physical discipline is slowly declining as some studies reveal lasting harms for children.* *Monitor on Psychology*, 43, 60.





Family organization: Introducing a proven strategy

Children generally do better when there is stability and a familiar routine at home. This understanding becomes particularly important when families are very mobile, like active-duty military families are. Also, given the number of changes your family must respond to when the transition to veteran status happens, stability is also a relevant issue for veteran families. Organization is equally critical for single-parent households, as these strategies can make things a lot easier to manage.

Military families often appreciate the need to instill some sense of routine and familiarity at home. After all, when there are many other aspects of your lives that you can't control, like duty assignments, school systems, and housing, you'll find strength and comfort in a home life that is decidedly more predictable. Your children will thrive when they have clear boundaries and understand how they fit within them.

Family organization is the process by which your family can plan schedules, coordinate calendars, dole out house chores, follow-up on school projects, and set individual and family goals (health, academic, career, chores, etc.). It offers

for the family a clear framework for the week/month, and a platform to discuss issues with family when unexpected stressors come up. Routinely scheduled family meetings are a proven strategy of family organization, and can help your military family establish and maintain some stability in the face of change.

Goal setting and progress tracking are the main agenda categories of family meetings. Goals can include exercise and nutrition targets to improve physical health, learning and stress management goals to improve mental health, relationships goals to improve emotional health, and volunteer and faith goals to improve connection with community and spiritual health. The agenda of a family meeting is an action plan that includes a clearly defined issue to solve, a drive to understand each other, sharing of ideas, and working as a team to agree on the best solution.

As parents, you are responsible for the emotional tone of the meetings and for modeling behavior that encourages a team approach. Mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth.

The team approach requires that your family:

- Makes decisions together
- Respects boundaries
- Celebrates gains while acknowledging challenges together
- Shows respect for each other
- Shows forgiveness
- Shows empathy
- Shares responsibility
- Shows trust and support
- Uses honest and positive communication

Developing and using effective and respectful communication skills are critical to running effective family meetings. It is a skill that takes constant practice, because it is the outcome of several conscious decisions.

First, you need to know what *not* to do when communicating:

- No interrupting who is speaking
- No name calling or swearing
- No yelling or walking out
- No put-downs
- No straying from the topic and remain present focused

Now you are ready for what to do. What is helpful to do when communicating is to be an active listener, and to know if your role. For example, are you going to problem solve or offer support?

An active listener will:

- Be willing to consider another's point of view even if different than their own
- Be mindful of non-verbal cues that can be interpreted as aggressive or defensive
- If you identify a problem, also offer a solution for which you will be accountable
- Take a break as needed. Stop the meeting. If the behavior is completely inappropriate, the team can ask that family

member to take a break and resume the family meeting without them. You want to give family members the opportunity to gather themselves if upset, and you do not want to encourage misbehavior by giving it too much attention.

- After the break (20 minutes, but no more than one hour) all come back to the meeting and resume
- Work with the mindset to resolve the issue not to win an argument

Having regular family meetings with the proper set-up allows your family to all be on the same page about what is happening with each family member for the next week, anticipate changes and plan for them, allow everyone to feel heard and valued, and most important, it teaches children from an early age that there will be a time at least once a week where they will have the full attention of their parent(s) to bring their concerns and issues in for help and guidance.

Up to this point we have discussed the reasons behind using a family meeting to address organization in your home. It guides families through goal setting and progress tracking, encourages a team approach to problem solving, and provides opportunities to work on effective communications skills. This next section describes the logistics of setting up a family meeting.

Right time and space

Your first step is to find a good day and time of day for all family members to gather on a regular basis. Think of the day of the week when everyone is present, available for 30-45 minutes, and the possibility of distractions is low. For some families this may be Saturday afternoon, Sunday morning after breakfast, or a day in the week that is pretty clear of other activities. Pick the best environment for a quiet, pleasant time together (e.g., family room, living room, or the kitchen table after a meal, all phones turned off).

Rules and roles

It is important that before the family meetings begin, you make clear what the ground rules are for these meetings.

Use of respectful language, one speaker at a time, how to let the team know we need a break, how misbehavior will be addressed, expected participation, who makes the final decision(s), and rotation of roles are just some guidelines to consider. Think about the particular dynamics of your family and add to these as needed. Opt to have ground rules be one of the first items on the agenda, and ask the team what they believe should be added to the family's ground rules.

Everyone should have a role in the family meeting. Assign a team leader to run the meeting, a time keeper, a scribe to write down the decisions the team makes, someone to make sure agenda items are addressed and moves items that are not resolved to the next family meeting, etc. These roles should rotate so everyone gets practice at all aspects of participation in the meetings, and assignments should be appropriate to the ages of your family members. Depending on the number of family members and personalities of family members, add roles to ensure that everyone feels included through their role in the meetings. It should be clear to all, though, that while everyone has a voice and is encouraged to share their opinion, ultimately the parent(s) is/are the final decision maker(s).

Agenda Items

It is important that all family members are aware of the topics that will be covered during the meetings. Agenda items should be a combination of items that come up

during the week and carry over of unresolved items from the last meeting. They should include family and individual goals as well as information sharing that could include planning of family activities, reviewing progress of chores, medical appointments, planning meals and grocery shopping lists, and challenges and victories of the week.

Family meetings are not the time to scold, punish or single out anyone. The focus is on coming together to acknowledge challenges, problem solve together, and celebrate success. Keep the meetings positive and moving toward progress. When children become adolescents and beyond, you'll be proud that they can call a family meeting to seek help before they turn to social media, peers, etc. It is your role as caregivers to teach, model, and encourage effective communication, problem solving, taking a break when it is needed, and returning to the issue to solve it. The last item on the agenda should be, "What can we do better next time?"

Wrapping it up

End on a positive note with a pleasant activity or treat that the whole family can enjoy together. Family organization through family meetings opens channels of communication, brings stability to the home environment, and teaches children about boundaries and respectful communication about all issues, including challenging topics.





Some important things to consider about **family meetings:**

1.

There are clear goals to work on, not a time for lecture, advice, or “therapy”

2.

Post the agenda where everyone can see it and add to it

3.

Have a clear structure to the meetings:

a. Opening statement, “okay family this is what we are going to cover today”

b. Read the ground rules

- One speaker at a time (use a transition item to signal the speaker)
- Three-minute talk limit
- No bad language
- Keep hands to yourself
- You can pass if you do not want to speak
- If you skip the meeting, you are going to accept what the team decides

c. Follow the agenda

- Old business
- New business

4.

If family discussion gets too intense, item can get tabled until the next meeting

5.

Everyone has a voice, but parent(s) are the final decision makers

6.

End the meeting with a pleasant activity like dessert, family board game, family walk that will foster connection among family members

Fostering healthy habits for your children

Making healthy choices is something that all families know you're supposed to do. Military families are more adept than usual about healthy habits, since you get a lot of emphasis on force strength and physical and mental fitness. But, putting healthy habits into practice at home can be a challenge. It's not always practical to make healthy choices about food when takeout fits more conveniently into busy lives. Just because you know the lessons of maintaining good health, doesn't mean your children understand them yet, or know how to put them into practice.

What is a healthy habit, anyway? Is it the kind of thing you know when you see it? Healthy habits are any regular behaviors that benefit your mental or physical health. They lead to happiness and wellbeing for you and your household. It follows that habits that aren't healthy can compromise your mental or physical health, and create negativity and misery. Good habits are things like getting enough sleep instead of regularly staying up too late, communicating with people instead of acting out, and demonstrating self-care instead of ignoring what your mind and body need to maintain a healthy outlook. Even getting homework or chores done before playing is a healthy habit. Children need tools like these to be able to strive and succeed.

Good habits are part of the structure you want to foster within your family. Consistency and routine are goals for your family, so making your routines full of positive practice can help ensure that good habits are part of what's expected, rather than an exception. It is crucial to equip your children with healthy habits so that they can persevere, and be better prepared for challenges. It takes some time for a new habit to stick, so if you're working some healthy habits into your family routine, expect it to be difficult at first before it becomes a new norm.

For example, going to bed early is a healthy habit to include as part of your family routine. Children need plenty of good sleep at night to concentrate during the day and keep their mental health resilient and focused. When you implement a daily wind-down routine before bed, like taking a bath, brushing teeth, reading a book, tucking-in, and lights out by 8:30 p.m. every night, you're instilling a healthy habit for your children.

Explain why and demonstrate how to develop healthy habits

"Do as I say and not as I do," isn't the best approach when modeling healthy behavior for your children. In addition to practicing children also need to understand the why and the how for these healthy habits to really stick. It's not just, "do as I say." It's not even, "do as I do." You have to think more in terms of, "let me explain to you why," and "here's how we can make it happen."

When you adequately attend to nutrition, physical activity, and mental health, you can generate the best possible environment for you and your family. The following outlines some details about how you can foster these healthy habits together as a family.





Nutrition

Schools are working to be better with fostering better nutrition and providing healthier choices for children starting from a young age. As a military family, you're familiar with the expectations of maintaining weight and fitness requirements for your job. You might feel like it's easy to continue that effort, or you may also feel like you want a break from that when you're at home. Either way, think about the opportunity you have to talk about nutrition with your children, and help them understand some basics.

This is the time to incorporate some of the why, and explain the rationale behind choosing what to eat. For example, when you're at a grocery store, take a moment to have a conversation around why you're choosing fresh produce over canned. Explain that it's because the fresh stuff has more nutritional value, and usually tastes better, too. At a restaurant, explain why you go with the salad over the fries. This way, you're not only passively modeling the behavior, but you're also actively teaching your children about why it's important and how they can do it, too.

When you can, plan to prepare some meals together. It's not always practical on busy school nights to go all out in the kitchen with the kids. But, find moments to show your children how to prepare a favorite dish. It's a great way to spend time together as a family, and it's another good time to talk about healthy choices and balance. As we know, children crave consistency, so the more consistent you are with these healthy habits early, the easier they will be to maintain.

Physical activity

Some schools also do a good job with integrating some physical education during the school day and sponsoring organized sports after school. These activities can be a great start for getting your kids more excited about a healthy lifestyle. Not all children are into traditional sports, but it doesn't mean they can't be active. There are all kinds of fun ways to bring more physical activity into their lives at home.

For example, karate is a physical activity that also includes benefits like self-discipline and competitive spirit. Yoga and tai chi incorporate measured movements that help you get



more centered and focused. Hiking and biking are other ideas that get you moving, and can also get your family out to explore more natural surroundings. Even things that seem more fun than physical, like a family treasure hunt or geocaching, can be another way for your family to be active and interact outside of your home.

These kinds of physical activities are important because they're healthy for our bodies, and also promote mental health. For military families, physical pursuits are also valuable to put into practice because they can travel with you regardless of where you're stationed.

Mental health

With tablets and screens, children and adults can spend way too much time stimulating parts of your brain that keep you awake and agitated for longer. It takes longer to power your body down for sleep after hours of screen time. When you have less sleep, you'll have increased likelihood of irritability and compromised ability to adequately cope with stress. None of that is good for mental health.

Healthy habits for your mental health start with switching off the screens for a while, and getting back to more genuine and personable connection. Reading, drawing, and painting are all good suggestions for stimulating your brain in creative ways without relying on a screen. They're also activities you can do on your own or together as a family. Other family activities that promote better mental health are family game nights, preparing for a family meeting, and planning a weekly menu for the family, which also ties back into nutritional health.

Volunteering for an important cause is something that military families often do, and it turns out it's also great for your family's mental health. The 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey shows that 71% of military families volunteered in the past year, and of those 78% volunteered in their civilian communities. When you volunteer together, and help your children understand why that's important and how they can get involved, you're helping them develop gratitude, and planning tools that are helpful long-term.



“When you're at a grocery store, take a moment to have a conversation around why you're choosing fresh produce over canned.”

Signs of trouble and healthy ways to cope

Even when you're doing all the right things to incorporate healthy habits into your family lifestyle, stressful situations will happen that can throw you off course. It's important to be mindful of warning signs that can indicate when something is wrong. If you see a significant or noticeable shift in appetite, sleep patterns, or moods, these can be early indicators that something is emotionally or mentally bothering you or your children.

Family members can demonstrate these behavior changes without even realizing they're doing them, so watch for changes. When you notice them, use the mindset that mental health is as important as physical health, and they're all part of the healthy habits you're working to instill in your military family.

Have conversations with your children, and let them know that everybody experiences some strong emotions sometimes. You can help them understand that every emotion is valid and has a purpose. Also, acknowledge your and your children's limitations and praise what they already do well. That way, they will be better able to disclose what's

bothering them without being afraid to disappoint you.

Struggling with a problem or difficulty facilitates learning from that experience. As a parent, you've got to balance between trying to fix everything and giving your children leeway to learn on their own. Healthy habits call for a healthy balance, so look to find it. Of course, it's OK to have the occasional fun treat with your family. It's not like you're trying to ban ice cream or screen time forever. But look for the balance and set up consistent boundaries so children can be more comfortable as they learn to operate within them.

Just as it's important to be a role model for your kids with healthy habits, it's also important to model for them how to cope when things are difficult. It's OK to sit down with your kids and share an example. Say something like, "You may notice I'm having a tough time, and this is how I'm going to take care of myself." That way, when they're feeling out of sorts, they'll have the language to express themselves, and understand the actions they can take to process the situation in a more adaptive way.





“ Just as it’s important to be a role model for your kids with healthy habits, it’s also important to model for them how to cope when things are difficult. ”





Closing words

Parents are the first and most important role models for your children. Your children look to you for an example for how to navigate through the world, in easy times and challenging times, too. Your military family has unique challenges as it is. And, when you have behavioral or emotional issues happening alongside them, you know that they can lead to stress and anxiety. Now you know that you can get through them together with concentrated effort and resources that can help you along the way.

When you pay attention to what's happening with your children, and the special difficulties they face and overcome during and after your military career, you're already well prepared to offer guidance and insight. It's good to be willing and able to get help when more intervention is needed. They're watching you, so keep in mind it's healthy to get more help when you need some, too. Wishing for a problem to go away is not a solution that works for the long-term.

Most importantly, your military career is one thing, but your family is a life-long thing. While your job may change, your children are always your children. They depend on you to help get the resources and insights they need to be healthy, productive grown-ups.

Checklist: How is your family set-up to win?

The previous sections included tons of knowledge and ideas. It is not realistic to try to implement it all at once. This part is to help you identify your main areas of difficulty, and set some plans.

What are some areas where your family is experiencing the most difficulties at the moment? (Make sure to include your partner/spouse when answering this section. Or if you're a single parent, maybe ask someone who knows you and your children well).



FAMILY CHECKLIST

Communication between co-parents:	great	good	not good	poor
Work/life balance and self-care:	great	good	not good	poor
Communication with children	great	good	not good	poor
Family routines and habits:	great	good	not good	poor
Children's habits:	great	good	not good	poor

List here two or three key habits you think would make family life better for each group:

Parent's habits: _____

Self-care habits: _____

Children's habits: _____

Family habits: _____

List here which habits you are going to start working on:

(preferably work on two at a time, then move to two more, for example you could start by having family meetings and build a self-care habit, and get these into a routine in the next six weeks)

Parent's habits:

1. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

2. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

Self-care habits:

1. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

2. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

Children's habits:

1. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

2. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

Family habits:

1. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*

2. _____ we will work on from _____ to _____ *(give yourself 6 weeks)*



www.1in5minds.org