A Battle Plan for Military Children's Mental Wellness

Part 2: Working Through Challenges

one in five minds
advocates for children's mental health

This handbook was created thanks to the support of USAA

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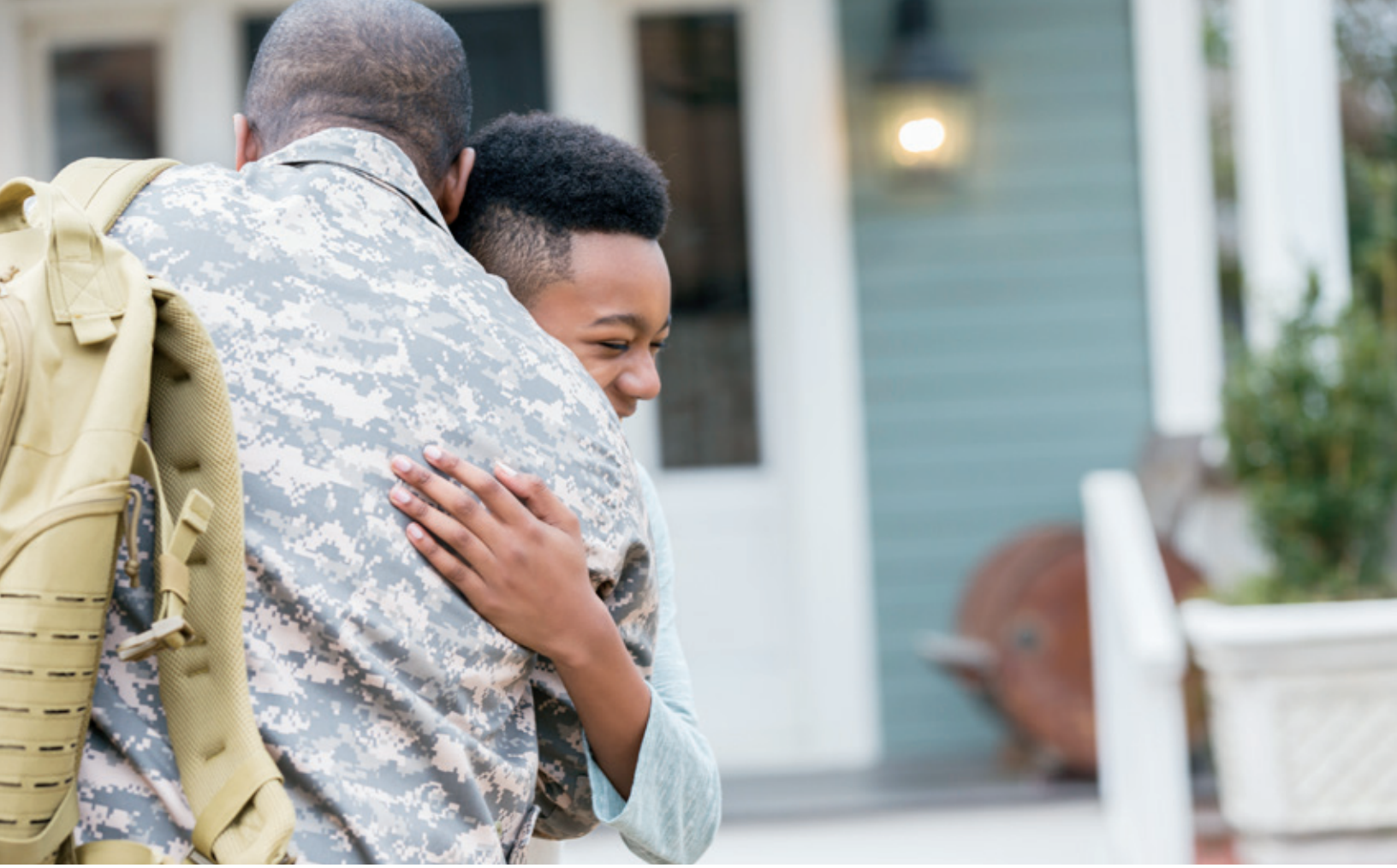
Military families know a lot about contingency planning in the face of numerous challenges. You're ready for almost anything, and you manage to get through some austere situations. This handbook can be a useful reference as you and your family strive for consistency, stability, and strength together.

In Part 1 of this series we described ways to manage your life and your family in usual conditions. Think of Part 2 as a guide for how to be better equipped to navigate some of your military family's unique circumstances. It can help you set your family up for success as you move through challenges like deployments, moves, injuries, transitions, and all the emotional and mental hurdles that come with it.

You'll find tools and insights for how to more effectively manage these challenges together as a family, as well as when and how to get more help if you need it. Also, military families often include extended friends and family who help and support you. This handbook is made with your whole support team in mind. It's designed to help more people understand how to help you and your military family with unique challenges. Feel free to share it with anybody who's going to be involved in helping you and your family.

As a military family, you know some challenges come with the job, such as deployment, moves, and transitions. Other challenges are less expected, and hopefully will not happen often, but they may. This section will help you prepare for and navigate these circumstances. The general advice is to be prepared and know you're not alone.

If, in the process of reading this book or putting its recommendations into practice, you find yourself stuck, please don't be afraid to reach out for help. You might also reference the One in Five Minds Military Parents Guide to Children's Mental Health (also available for free at www.1in5minds.org) for more details and resources for your child's mental and emotional wellness.



Dealing with the difficulties of deployment: Before, during, and after

Deployments impact military families and children more than ever. The 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey shows that for the first time in the history of the survey, both service members and military spouses rank the impact of deployment on children among their top five most concerning issues.

Regardless of how many times your family has done it, or how old your children are when it happens, deployment is always going to come with a measure of difficulty. The time before the parent deploys can be filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and dread. Then, while the parent is away, the rest of the family gets used to a new normal. When the parent returns, there can be additional stress for children as the family reintegrates and learns how to live together again. If you're a single military parent, then you're also dealing with those shifting roles all at once.

There's no easy way for children to get through any deployment, but you can help make it a little easier on them. Take some time to prepare for challenges that will come, and have a game plan to approach all three phases of deployment; pre-deployment, deployment, and return (also called redeployment).

Before deployment: Shape your story

Military families develop a story around each deployment. Your deployment story begins before the service member parent leaves. Here is your unique opportunity to help define the story you want. It can be empowering, especially at a time when it seems like you have little or no control over anything else.

When preparing your child for your deployment, take some time to consider how you want them to remember this time.

Think about what would make them feel loved, and what would set your family up for success in the coming days, weeks, and months of this time apart.

Consider the timing

Military families get used to anticipating the pace of deployment, and older children may know when to expect one to come up, especially if you've done it before. Considering that projected deployment dates can often shift around for weeks and months, deciding when to let your children know about it can be difficult.

While you don't want to prolong any potential anxiety, it is important to provide enough time to let the entire family process. It helps to think about how your children handle other transitions, and what your family does to support that child when changes are on the horizon. Be sure to plan to talk about it when there's plenty of time for questions, reassurance, and review of what comes next. This isn't the time to be rushed or distracted with other family business.

Create a plan, and share it with honest language

Children are great at following your lead. If you project a confident vision for what lies ahead and how your family will get through it together, then chances are your children will be better able to understand and feel assured.

Children of all ages need to know who will be taking care of them, that they are loved and supported, and that they will be protected. For young children, this is done best with concrete messages and physical reassurance with hugs, kisses, and cuddles. For older children, an honest, reassuring discussion is helpful. Regardless of how old your children are, encourage them to ask questions, and explain why the parent has to be gone in developmentally appropriate terms. For example, this is a deployment, which is not the same as "going to work" or "taking a trip."

During deployment: Stay connected

You may not know for sure how often you'll be able to stay in touch, or what methods you can use until the parent gets to their destination. Then, there may be any number of options. Whether you stay connected through Skype/ Facetime, email, messenger apps, care packages and letters, or any of the above, it's important to incorporate communication into your new routine as regularly and effectively as possible.

For example, you'll have to consider the different time zones to keep track of what options might fit your family's schedules. Include children in activities where you can make and send care packages, videos, and messages. When children participate in keeping in touch and sharing important news, it's easier for them to manage the parent being gone, and makes the parent's return much smoother. You can also help them stay connected with an item that reminds them of their deployed parent. Children like to put together photo albums and hold onto special gifts or other tangible reminders to keep their parent close even while they're far away.

Manage a new routine

When a parent is deployed, your household will run differently than it did when both parents were home. Your children may see more help in the form of friends, neighbors, or extended family who visit you more often. You may travel more to stay closer to family and other support systems. Everyday things like school drop-off and pickup, preparing meals, and managing chores are going to look different for a while. It helps children to understand the familiar in things that seem very different at first. Try to keep elements of their routine, or establish a new way of managing things with their participation.

Measure time and milestones

Children can sometimes have a hard time with the concept of time. Six months to a toddler is inconceivable, whereas an older child can understand that's most of a school year. Still, when children understand the parameters of what they're working with, and get a sense of how long their parent will be deployed, they'll be better equipped to cope.

If your child is not yet old enough to grasp traditional months, then anchor the time the deployed parent is gone to events that your child values. For example, you could share that when they finish 1st grade you'll be home soon, or that their parent will be back sometime after Thanksgiving and before Christmas. It can also be helpful to use a visual like a calendar for counting down or a paper chain with a link for each week. Be sure to remember that no redeployment (return) date can be absolutely certain, so it's important to manage your children's expectations and think in terms of a range rather than an exact date.

After deployment: Reconnect

Many service member parents experience mixed emotions around reconnecting with their children. There's excitement to be back, nervousness about how children will react, and anticipation for the quality time you hope to make up. Whether this is your first deployment or your fourth, your family looks different at the end of each separation.

Start the reconnection process before the service member returns. Provide young children with concrete examples (ex. Remember how Daddy used to help with bath time and bedtime stories? He will be coming home soon, and I know Daddy is so excited to read to you again). Encourage older children to have conversations about the upcoming homecoming as well. Be receptive to their thoughts and feelings, including their hopes and any concerns. Be sure the deployed parent compares notes with the co-parent about important updates and details about what's been going on in your children's lives.

Manage expectations and keep communicating

Children can be very surprising with their reactions to their parent's return. Unfortunately, there isn't a surefire way to predict how your child will react when their service member parent comes home. By growing in your understanding of their process, you will hopefully be better equipped to meet their current needs through reassurance, support, and collaboration.

For young children, it can be very hard to wrap their mind around their mom/dad not having a rectangle around their face any longer, like they got used to seeing with phones/tablets/picture frames. This may leave them standoffish and unsure. School-age children might be worried that their recently returned parent won't return when they go to work for the day or go run an errand; this anxiety could make them clingy or hesitant to engage. Older children often experience role and responsibility shifts over the course of deployment.

Make time for regular, child-directed play and quality time

For the parent who's just returned from deployment, re-establishing your role in sacred routines like bedtime or weekend sports, and collecting the many missed hugs and cuddles is really important. Once you are home, it can be very beneficial for both you and your children to incorporate regularly dedicated playtime into your day (or quality time for adolescents). It isn't only a time for fun; it is also when children do a lot of their learning and connection building with others. Optimally, do a non-competitive, low-stakes activity that you both can enjoy. It can also help you learn their new interests and abilities since you last spent time together before you left.

Traditions and play:

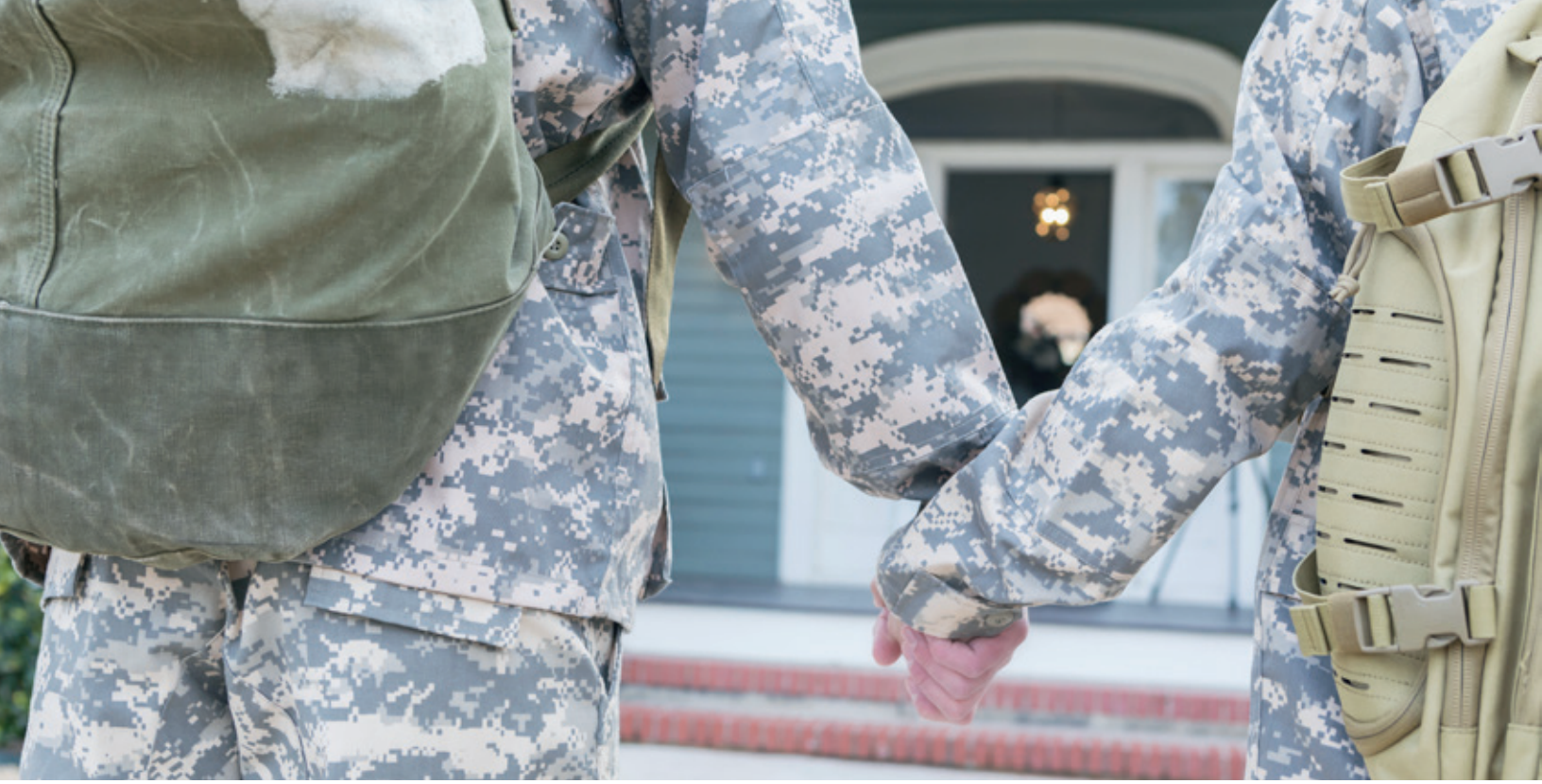
Cost-effective ideas to find meaning when your family is separated

Sometimes challenges, such as deployments or other military separations, can allow for opportunities to grow as a family. Families who tend to be most resilient through deployments are those that make meaning of and create traditions around them. Below are some cost-effective ways to build meaningful traditions and stay connected as a family.

- Create a deployment wall. The materials don't have to be expensive to be meaningful for your family. Buy craft materials at the dollar store. Fill it with pictures of your family with your service member in uniform, pictures that your children draw "for Mom/Dad," an old clock with Mom/Dad's time on it, a world map with a heart around the area Mom/Dad is deployed, a calendar to help count down the time until Mom/Dad returns, or a makeshift "mailbox" to drop letters and pictures to send.
- Create a "family flag" that represents your family's military (and other) values. Hang the flag on the deployment wall.
- Before you leave, write a series of short messages to your children on sticky-notes for each day (or week) you're away. Your family can make a new ritual out of reading them together.
- Take one of your children's toys, such as a car or some blocks, with you so you can "play" together on video chat. You can also take photos of yourself in various locations with the toys to send back to the family.
- Place a photo of yourself in your child's room. Each night, your child can, "kiss you goodnight." Tell your child that you felt the kiss all the way over there when you speak next.
- Have your children make a list of all the things they want to do with their deployed parent upon return.
- Find out the direction of where your service member is from your home. Each night, go outside with your children and "throw" a hug to Mom/Dad.

You may already have meaningful rituals or traditions in your family, such as eating dinner together as a family, nighttime prayers, family game night, or weekly family outings. It is important to continue those routines and rituals as much as possible throughout the deployment cycle or TDY assignment. You can incorporate your service member and keep them "present" in many ways. For example:

- In some families, each family member gets to choose something each time a tradition happens. For example, every time we buy ice cream, a different family member chooses the flavor. Include your deployed service member in this rotation. Ask your children, "What do you think Mom/Dad would pick today?" Use it as an opportunity to "honor" your service member
- Take pictures or videos during family routines and outings to send to them.
- Intentionally bring them up in conversations when engaging in these activities.
- When your children talk to their deployed parent, encourage them to "fill Mom/Dad in" on what happened during these activities.
- If schedules allow, call or video chat together during some important traditions.



What to do **when both parents serve** at the same time

According to the Department of Defense's military demographics report, more than 34,000 active duty service members are dual-military households with children, meaning both spouses actively serve, and have dependents who are minors. More than 47,000 in the Guard and Reserves are dual-military spouses with minor dependents.

The odds are that, for some of these families, both parents will have to be away for temporary duty (TDY) or deployment at the same time. The military helps to make sure you don't have to wait for this situation to arise before considering what you'd do about it. All military service branches require single-parent households and dual-military households to have a family care plan at the ready.

Of course, the military doesn't always make things clean and simple. Dual military households may have parents who need to leave and return at different times, and their schedules won't necessarily coordinate in a straightforward way. You also can't expect the luxury of time. Sometimes you get plenty of notice, but other times you may have to mobilize in a matter of days or weeks. Finally, you won't be able to find elements of a family care plan in one place; you'll have to visit many offices to gather the right information and resources. But, planning to talk early and often about what a successful plan would include, including all the support and resources available, will result in being better prepared when the time comes.

Assembling a family care plan

A family care plan is a document that designates a short-term care provider and long-term care provider for your children. Short-term is considered just a few weeks, while long-term includes something like a deployment. You'll want to think about the day-to-day care needs for your child, and identify a trusted person who can provide them with loving attention and care. Some parents want to keep their children close to home, to avoid further disruptions. Others have a strong family support network that might not be at or near the installation, so parents entrust the children to extended family while they're gone.

Family care plans also include medical and legal powers of attorney, so you'll need to visit your legal services office on

Preparing the caregivers for when dual-military parents or single parents serve away from home

Dual-military parents have the unique risk of having deployments or TDY orders at the same time, and leaving the family. Single-parent military households face a similar dilemma, and also require a family care plan to be ready at all times. Your family care plan has to meet many logistical requirements for your children that can extend for weeks, months, or more.

As you are sorting out details like who will watch the children, whether that person will move into your home or the children will move in with them, and how the budget will be handled, remember to plan for your child's resilience as well. Children do better during deployment when their homefront caregiver is doing well. This suggests that investing time in supporting the relationship that your child will have with their new caregiver is likely to ease this transition and the difficult time on your family.

Expand the role of caregiver to include the role of co-parent, and bring them in on family routines, rituals, and disciplinary styles before you're away. Try to support your new co-parent in maintaining as many routines and rituals as are possible in order to provide stability for the children. When possible, seek family care plan options that would allow for the caregiver to move into your home and maintain foundations such as home, school, and social support for your child or teen.

When possible, seek family care plan options that would allow for the caregiver to move into your home and maintain foundations such as home, school, and social support for your child or teen.

As you are busy making all of the arrangements, be sure to include your children in conversations as plans take shape and provide them with age-appropriate information about the big transition that is ahead, both in terms of the deployment and the new caregiver. Explain to your child the relationship that they will have with the caregiver, and provide space for an appropriate range of emotional reactions now and later (e.g., sad to be without Mom and Dad, angry that their parents had to leave, excited because Grandma always has the best bedtime stories, scared that Uncle won't let them pick out the Christmas tree like Dad does).

Continue to apply the skills and tools that are found in this handbook, while remembering to bring the new caregiver in on the tips, because this person is now also a co-parent along with you or your spouse.

base for more information about that. You'll also want to include a plan for financial readiness, so that financial resources are available when your children need food, clothing, and other things your care provider will need to buy while you're gone. For example, you can consider establishing a separate bank account or provide access to other funds with a budget in mind. Also, be sure to have names and information for contacts in your chain of command, with your unit/company/family group, health care provider, and other key numbers.

What to consider when you identify your care provider

Pick somebody you can trust, and who will keep the welfare and wellbeing of your child first. Children are resilient, but pre-deployment and separation of not one but both parents will call for extra attention and support. Whomever you choose, your short-term and long-term provider should be aware of this, and be prepared to help identify if the child is having an especially hard time with the transition, and help the child access counseling as needed.

If the care provider you choose is not part of the military community, then you'll have a few other things to consider. First, you'll want to be sure they have access to the base while you're away. For example, your child may have a medical need that requires care at the military treatment facility on post. Without permission to access the base, they won't be able to get care for your child there. You'll be able to make arrangements for that access ahead of time, but only with good planning.

If you have school-aged children, be sure to communicate with their school about what's happening. Some schools on or near bases will have special military liaison offices to help with these kinds of issues that students may face. If not, the teachers and administrators will want to know what's happening at home, so they can help complement support for your children at school, too.

Attend the pre-deployment briefing

Of course, it would be easy if the military provided some one-stop-shop guidance for how to navigate when both parents who are service members need to be away from their children at the same time. Unfortunately, you'll have to gather information in pieces from a few different places. The best way to get a lay of the support landscape is to attend the pre-deployment briefing. There, you'll be able to hear from different agencies that are there to help, including legal services, financial readiness, and family service offices.

Remember every deployment is different

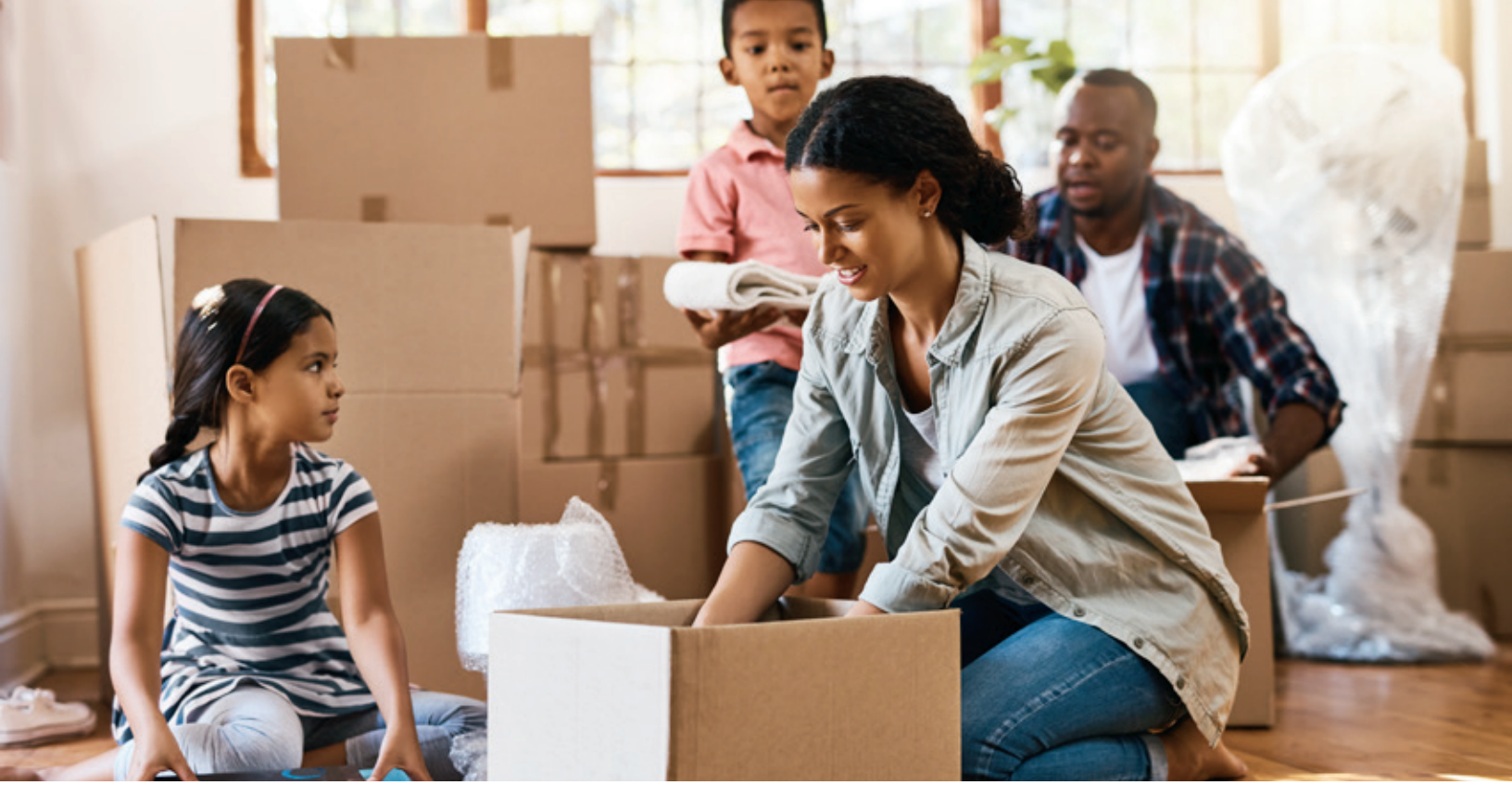
You may have deployed before, or already faced a time when you've been away for days and weeks at a time for training or other temporary duty. The last time, you may not have had a spouse or other dependents to consider. This time around, it might be a year or two later, and you may have a young child to factor into your plans. Expect there to be a whole new set of information to gather and options to consider compared to how it went last time.

What to do if there's an emergency

Be sure your care provider knows how to access base when you're gone. If they're watching your children away from the installation area, then be sure they have the information to reach Tricare in your region. They can help point you to health care that's covered so you don't come home to a costly bill that could have been avoided with some planning and information.

Military OneSource is another good resource if you or your care providers need help when both parents are away. You can always call Military OneSource at 800-342-9647, and explain the situation. They'll be able help get you to the right place.

Keep in mind that the American Red Cross is the starting point to notify deployed service members and verify any kind of emergency back home. For example, if a family member passes away or has another catastrophic situation arise back home, the care provider will want to notify both the Red Cross and your home station to coordinate and expedite your trip home.



Dealing with a move: Preparing your child and building a support system

In the military, a move is also known as a permanent change of station (PCS). Military families can expect to move every two to three years, so this fact of military life is not a matter of if, but a matter of when. According to the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), the average child in a military family moves six to nine times during a school career, which is three times more often than their civilian counterparts. It's good to put some systems in place to prepare your child for a move, then build and leverage a support system to help along the way.

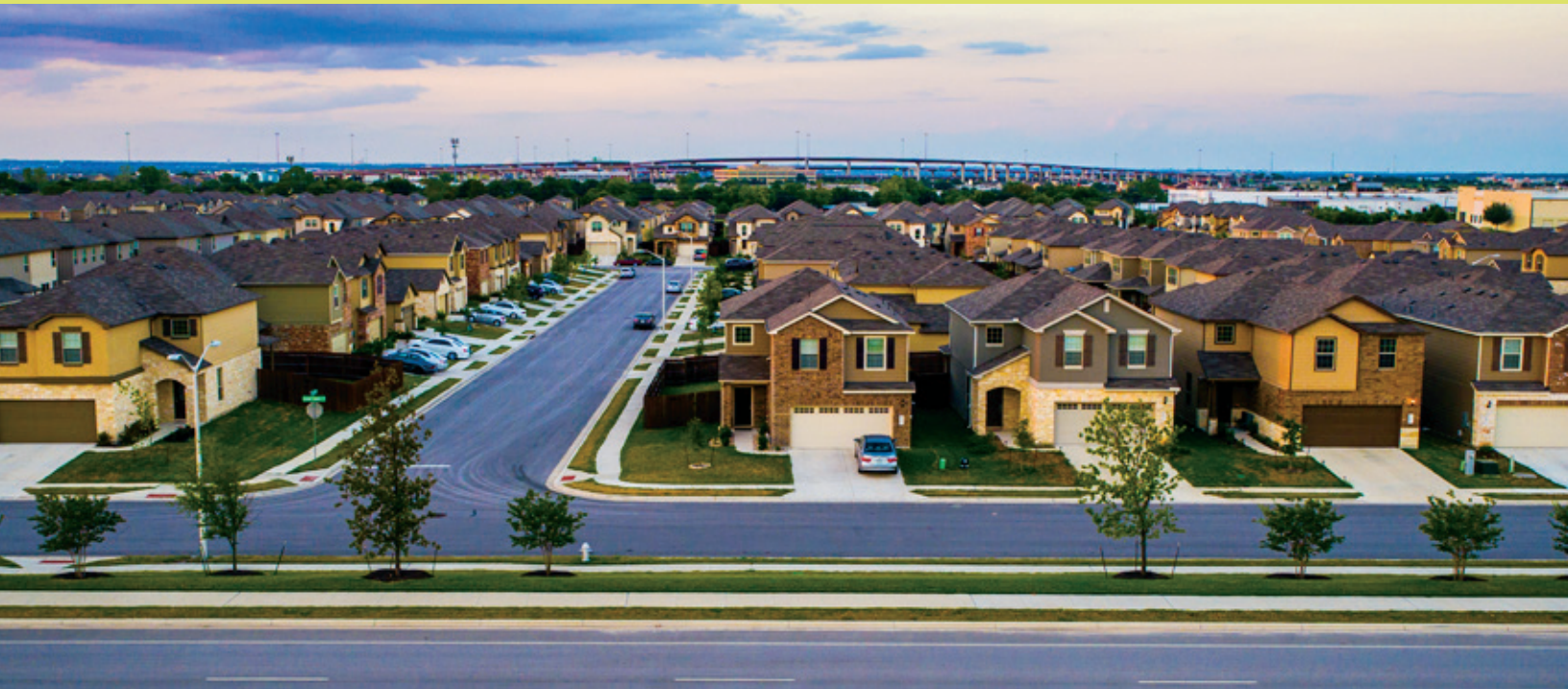
Lessen anxiety as you prepare

You may have moved so many times that you've got it down to a science. Don't assume your kids are as adept at moving as you've become. They might not completely understand what's going on yet. They may have developed a lot over the few years since your last move, and need help to understand it differently now. Because official PCS orders can be uncertain for weeks or months, then can be known to change, you may feel some anxiety around planning your move.

A good way to lessen your child's anxiety around a move is to talk it out. Moving isn't something you'll be able to spring on your family like a surprise vacation. You'll want to communicate about it as much as possible, and tailor your discussions around an upcoming move depending on how old your children are. For example, very young children can have a hard time understanding the difference between certainty and possibility, as well as difficulty comprehending timetables. Older children can better understand all that, but you still need to be mindful of the impact a move will have on them.

Children of all ages need to understand they have a place to share their concerns. It's important to be upbeat, and understand that keeping children informed helps to stoke excitement and reduce stress. When children talk about being scared or upset, be sure to take time to talk about why, and validate their concerns. Then, you can focus on some positive aspects of an upcoming move, and encourage them to get involved in the planning and preparation.

Parents should start gathering information about your new neighborhood and school as soon as you learn the location of your new home.



Do your homework

Your kids may be the ones bracing for a new school, but you'll have lots of homework to do, too. Parents should start gathering information about your new neighborhood and school as soon as you learn the location of your new home. Look for information like the number of students in the school, how big the classes are, what kinds of sports and clubs are available, a calendar of events, and special academic services.

Use digital media to scope out more information about the school before your older kids get a chance to do it (because they will), so you'll be better prepared for those conversations that will come up. You should try to visit the school in person before the first day, but if you can't, see if you can arrange some contact with the teacher, see pictures/video of the classroom, or talk to some peers before you get there.

When and how to get help

Sometimes, no matter how upbeat, positive, and well prepared you are, your child may react negatively to an upcoming move. If your child seems to be resistant to moving, and continues to be, then you should first try to understand why. It usually has something to do with concern and worry, which gets better the more you talk to your child about their likes and dislikes about the idea of moving.

Validate their feelings and let them know that many children don't like moving from one place to another, and that such feelings are normal. If you're also feeling anxious about moving, it can be helpful to talk about what some of your concerns may be and how you are dealing with them. You'll have a great chance to model coping skills in this situation.

Of course, if you start to see physical or other major changes in your children, you might look into getting some help from a counselor. For example, if they're throwing up because they're so nervous, if they just can't or won't talk about their anxiety, or are otherwise acting out and experiencing negative behaviors, then look for some other help. A counselor or therapist can help teach your children techniques to deal with anxiety, like breathing, positive focus, and grounding.

The following are additional resources that can help military children prepare for a move:

- FOCUS – Families OverComing Under Stress is a U.S. Navy program that provides resilience training to all military children, families, and couples. FOCUS can be found online, and at nearly 30 U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Army, and Air Force installations. You can also subscribe to a quarterly newsletter that offers tips on common challenges such as moving. www.focusproject.org

- The Military Child Education Consortium (MCEC) offers a Military Parents Guide to School Policies and Transitions here: www.militarychild.org/upload/files/resources/A_Military_Parents_Guide_to_Scho.pdf and a checklist for school moves at www.militarychild.org/upload/files/resources/MCEC_Quick_Checklist_for_School_.pdf

- Military Kids Connect is an online community for military children ages 6–17 that provides access to age-appropriate resources to deal with the unique psychological challenges of military life. www.militarykidsconnect.dcoe.mil

- MilitaryOneSource offers a variety of toolkits to help families, including a series of articles that deal with all aspects of moving. www.militaryonesource.mil

- MilitarySpouse.com has a comprehensive article titled, "The Impact of PCS Moves on Your Kids." www.militaryspouse.com/military-life/pcs/the-impact-of-pcs-moves-on-your-kids

- Operation We Are Here has a detailed list of advice and resources for military moves. www.operationwearehere.com

Dealing with **the trauma of a wounded parent**

Even under the best circumstances, deployments take a toll on military families that can last long after the deployed parent returns home. If a military parent comes home from a deployment as a wounded warrior, then children can have a different set of needs as part of the healing process.

First, understand that any kind of injury from deployment, whether it's visible or invisible, can be very confusing to your child. Children may think that they won't have the same relationship with their wounded parent as they did before the deployment. If the parent has a physical injury, then children can see a visible wound. The parent may have a limp or need a wheelchair, or not be physically able to do things they used to. Invisible wounds include mental health issues, like post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, which can mean the parent might be more easily angered or withdrawn. The child sees that the parent isn't engaging with them in the same way, but may not understand why. Further complicating this issue is if the parent is also not aware of the changes taking place after they return home.

Another source of confusion and anxiety for children is the struggle to understand the role of the parent who's been hurt and recovering. They can be unsure about how to even approach that parent. For example, are they too fragile to be able to ask them for help with something? Children also have a grieving process of the parent they had, along with the fantasy of the parent they expected compared to the parent who now has limitations. It's like experiencing a loss.

When the child doesn't get the acknowledgment or understanding they need, it can make them feel unworthy, sad, or guilty. Those feelings can lead to depression and other mental health concerns for the children.

Recognizing signs of distress in your child

When children experience stress and anxiety, the signs may not always be very clear. Look at behavioral indications like acting out at home or school, lower grades, spending time with friends they normally don't, isolating themselves from friends/family, bed-wetting, or other sleep disturbances. Start by asking yourself whether your child is the same or if they're struggling. Then, you can map out some steps to help.

How you can help your child

It's important to invite your children to talk openly about what's going on. The injured parent will likely be working on some physical or mental health therapy during the healing process. Ask the child what they know about the injury or issue, and invite them to open up. Open discussion is one way to get started, but helping children open up can also come through creative outlets, artwork, journaling, or physical outlets like playing a sport they love.

The most important thing to remember is: These things take time. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away. Open communication is best, and it's not something you just do once. It will take patience for everybody to adjust to the change.

When to ask for help

Maybe you've made multiple attempts to talk, and the child is still shutting down. They could be dealing with excessive guilt, or fear that something bad is going to happen. You may notice household conflicts that are not conducive to open conversations, and they could be getting worse or more frequent.

Asking for help can be empowering. You can get the right information about how to normalize routines as much as possible for the wellbeing of the family. Counselors, therapists, psychologists, and family therapists can be instrumental in helping children communicate with their parents. Play therapy for younger children, or talk therapy for older children, can facilitate more open communication around what's going on with the child.

As the family adapts to new demands and unexpected changes, one thing that's immensely helpful is to seek information about how to appropriately integrate the veteran with their new needs. Have conversations with the physical/occupational therapist about how the veteran can participate in activities with the children, be responsible for things in the home, and encourage healing. Make sure that the channels of communication stay open.

It's never too late to ask for help from a professional. They're available to help, and what they do is very effective to help children deal with the trauma of a wounded parent.

The most important thing to remember is: These things take time. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away. Open communication is best, and it's not something you just do once. It will take patience for everybody to adjust to the change.

Where to find help

It's hard for any parent to see your child struggling, especially if you're already dealing with a service member's physical injury or mental health issue. Know that thousands of other military families have gone through similar things. Seek them out, or get involved in a support group.

To find a good therapist or psychiatrist, ask a pediatrician for a good referral. You may also find a good referral from the school or a clergy member, or check with friends who've gone through similar struggles. You may find ways to come through it as a stronger family, and develop deeper relationships.

Dealing with painful family changes
such as injury, loss, or divorce

No one likes to think about the possibility of painful life circumstances such as a severe injury, illness, or loss of a family member, or divorce. If an event like this has ever happened in your family, you know it can feel like an emotional shock to your system, and that it often affects the whole family. Times like this are confusing and it can be difficult to know what to do. Below are some things to keep in mind when navigating these difficult situations in order to best support yourself, your children, and your family.

Take care of yourself.

The first step in caring for your military family during difficult times is to make sure you are taking care of your own needs. Check in with yourself and be sure to engage in regular self-care practices like those noted earlier. If you notice that you are struggling to function at home or work, or if you are having trouble understanding your own emotions or reactions, it is important to seek help from a mental health professional. Not doing so could lead to further distress for your family. During stressful times, a parent's mental health functioning predicts your children's depression and acting-out behaviors.[1]

Lean on your support system.

Your friends, extended family, military support group, military leadership, or spiritual community are all potential sources of support. Having social support is one of the strongest predictors of resiliency in the face of stress and trauma.[2]

Consider seeking professional support.

Depending on your family's experience and reactions, your family's mental and physical health, and the amount of support each member of your family has, your family may need extra support. Even if your family is coping well, consider seeking extra support through a mental health specialist. A therapist can be an objective and supportive listener and a good, "check in." Additionally, if you find that you or your family members are struggling to function at school, home, or work, a therapist will have a plan for how to help things improve over time.

[1] Lester, P., Peterson, K., Reeves, J., Knauss, L., Glover, D., Mogil, C.,… Beardslee, W. (2010). The long war and parental combat deployment: Effects on military children and at-home spouses. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 49(4), 310-320. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.01.003 [2] Southwick, S. M., Sippel , L., Krystal, J., Charney , D., Mayes, L., & Pietrzak, R. (2016). Why are some individuals more resilient than others: The role of social support. World Psychiatry, 15(1), 77-79, https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20282


Having social support is one of the strongest predictors of resiliency in the face of stress and trauma .

Expect and accept some disruptions.

Difficult and potentially traumatic experiences are a shock to the system. It takes time for our brains and bodies to process and make sense of things in the following weeks and months. Allow yourself and your family time to heal and adjust to changes. Know that things will not feel, "normal," and your children will need extra love and support. This may mean some disruptions in routines and some bumps in the road around things like schoolwork, housework, etc. While it's important to maintain a general sense of consistency, allow some additional flexibility over the next month or so as everyone processes, copes, and adjusts.

Know that it's ok to feel strong emotions.

Having and expressing natural emotions (e.g., sadness, grief, anger, anxiety) is a normal and healthy response to difficult life events. At times, parents can struggle with allowing themselves to feel their emotions for fear that it will scare or upset their children. Many parents say, "I can't cry, I have to be strong for my family." However, allowing yourself to feel and face difficult emotions in an appropriate way is a sign of strength and resiliency. If you find yourself getting tearful in front of your children, you can use it as an opportunity to teach them that it's okay to feel sad. Similarly, parents may not talk to their children about a difficult event because they don't want their children to "dwell" on it or to be upset. Yet, it is likely that your child is thinking about it, just like you. It is natural and healthy to think about and talk about difficult experiences as your brain processes it, and it is important that your children feel safe and supported in doing so as well.

Don't avoid the subject.

You can help your children to identify and appropriately express their emotions by letting them know that it's okay to talk about it, and it's okay to feel anger, sad, scared, etc. For younger children, or children who are less verbal, they may choose to express their thoughts and emotions through play, such as acting out their experience with toys or dolls. Children may also choose to express how they feel through drawing or coloring. Older children may choose to write a letter, poem, or music. It is important not to pressure your child to tell you something in particular, but to create a safe space in which you know they can share how they feel with you. When they do share, you don't need to be an expert on what to say. Just let your child know that you hear them, you love them, that it's okay to have these feelings, and that they are strong and brave for sharing them with you.

Use and encourage coping skills.

Even though it's important to feel our emotions, it's helpful to have tools to regulate ourselves and feel better, too. Coping skills are important in helping us behave in effective ways, even when we're faced with difficult emotions. Coping skills are especially important when difficult thoughts or emotions are interfering with our functioning as a parent, at school, or at work. Coping skills are important for people of all ages. The best coping skills are usually simple, something you already enjoy and know how to do, and can be done in a range of situations. It can include deep breathing, listening to music, drawing, reading, cleaning and organizing, taking a bubble bath, taking a quiet walk, imagining your favorite place, etc. Use them and also encourage your children to use them. You can brainstorm with your child things that s/he can do to feel better when s/he becomes too upset. You could even create a coping skills box together.

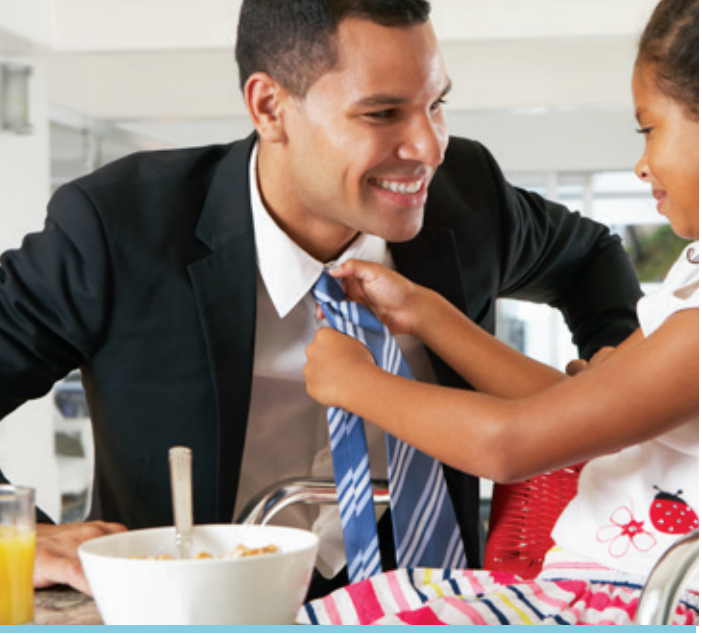
If you find yourself getting tearful in front of your children, you can use it as an opportunity to teach them that it's okay to feel sad.

Give yourself grace.

In the midst of difficult times, you may notice that you have more trouble concentrating, lower frustration tolerance, or are quicker to tears. You may make more mistakes at work or at home. This is normal. During these times, it is especially important to be kind to yourself. In fact, shame, guilt, and negative thoughts about yourself only tend to make things worse. So remember, take care of yourself, seek support for yourself and your family, and know that with time, and by following these guidelines, things will eventually get easier.

Revisit the prospect of professional support.

If you're trying all of these methods and still have some struggle, please know that's not a shortcoming or failure on your part. Most people who are dealing with painful changes to their military families need to work with treatment professionals who can help. Even if you're feeling like everything is on track and you've got it all covered, you still might want to check in with a therapist for additional guidance and support.



60%

of veterans report difficulty adjusting to civilian life.*

44%

of veterans do not have a job search plan.*

53%

of veterans say it took longer than expected to find employment.*

**Source: Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Journal Survey*

Dealing with transition out of the military

The transition to civilian life after active military service can be challenging and difficult for families. Research from the 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey shows that 60% of veterans report difficulty adjusting to civilian life. Problems include not having a job search plan (44%), not knowing how to access healthcare (39%), and not having a permanent place to live after leaving the military (27%). More than half of respondents (53%) say it took longer than expected to find employment when transitioning out of the military.

Military transitions happen after completing an obligation, retiring with 20 years of service or more, or leaving full-time active duty to join the National Guard or Reserves. Regardless of which situation fits your family circumstances, challenges around military transitions can lead to uncertain times and anxiety when your active-duty military family member completes service. For example, the prospect of being able to choose where you want to live for the first time in a long time can be empowering, but also daunting.

It's interesting to note that according to the Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey, nearly a third of military families say they have not had an in-depth conversation with a local civilian in the last month. That kind of divide can feel hard to bridge as your family works to engage with a new community, and with people who may not understand your circumstances as well as you may be used to. It helps to know you're still a veteran family, which always ties you to a larger community.

Key changes to expect transitioning from active-duty to civilian life

You may think you'll get an element of stability when you leave the military. For example, civilian operational tempo probably won't be as intense, and there's no chance of deployment or TDY. You may think your family will have more time together with less stress. In reality, military transitions can mean a lot of unpredictability.

You can expect to feel unclear about your next steps, and your children can feel unsteady about their path ahead as well. Understand that a lot of work goes into transitioning out of military service. Expect weeks and months of appointments and follow-up appointments with the VA system, out-processing from your installation, etc. Even smaller things like getting a new wardrobe, after being used to wearing a uniform every day, will take some time and getting used to. The service member may be home more, but may not be as available right away as they may be after a few months.

Transitioning out of the military is also a time to reassess the service member's role in your family. It's kind of like when a service member returns from a deployment. There will be some resetting of routines, responsibilities, and roles in the family.

Things that can make transition challenges worse

Stability and consistency are good qualities in any household. Children in predictable environments know the structure of their day, know the rules of their home, and know the consequences of following the rules or not. For military families, you understand how important consistency is, because you work really hard to re-establish roles and routines when you move, or when a service member deploys.

Well-intended military families, in an effort to keep things as stable as possible during the transition, may continue to let the veteran pull rank at home. You might look to them to make all the decisions, without getting a lot of feedback about the needs of the family. That can create resentments within the family; feeling that their opinions may not be listened to or not valued. It also creates a problem, because the veteran isn't able to fully integrate into the needs of the family.

On the other end of the spectrum, some families continue to function as if the veteran is still deployed or otherwise not available to participate in day-to-day dynamics. You might have grown used to making family decisions without including feedback from the veteran. Being pushed out in this way doesn't necessarily help in adjusting to the transition out of the military, either.

How transition can affect children at home

While children love boundaries, they also love to test them. That's another reason why it's so important to be as consistent as possible with rules and consequences. As children find their way during a military transition, they will want to test things. They're getting used to who the decision-maker is and want to see if expectations might be different. When it comes to chores, homework, and behavior issues, children are going to want to recalibrate those boundaries.

To work with this, parents and caregivers are going to have to be on the same page. You may have to shift how you work as a couple. Having the same expectations and enforcing consequences the same way will help. A counselor can help you work out the best approach if you're struggling.

Recommended practices for successful transition

Before your military transition happens, it's important to have a transition plan in place. Identify what services are going to be available to you and your children, and how you can access those services. If you're already receiving counseling, then you may expect to get a new provider. Be sure to coordinate and get a warm hand-off.

Also, establish and keep familiar routines. Weekly family meetings are a good chance to check in and talk about issues that come up during the week, and make decisions as a family. They also send the message that everybody in the family has a voice to make decisions together.

Dealing with **your child's special needs**

Military families have special needs, compared to civilian counterparts. The 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey shows that 40% of military families have experienced six or more months of separation in the last 18 months. Separations for weeks and months at a time take a toll on families, and especially affect children. Military families also move about three times more often than the general population, which brings a host of other stressors.

40%

of military families have experienced six or more months of separation in the last 18 months.

If you're concerned about your child's behavior, mental health, and emotional wellbeing, you are not alone. While children are resilient and adaptable, it's also very normal for children, especially those in military families, to feel stressed in the face of transition and uncertainty. You can learn how to identify when normal reactions to stress and anxiety require additional help. You might also reference the One in Five Minds Military Parents Guide to Children's Mental Health (also available for free at www.1in5minds.org) for more details and resources for your child's mental health.

Recognize the need

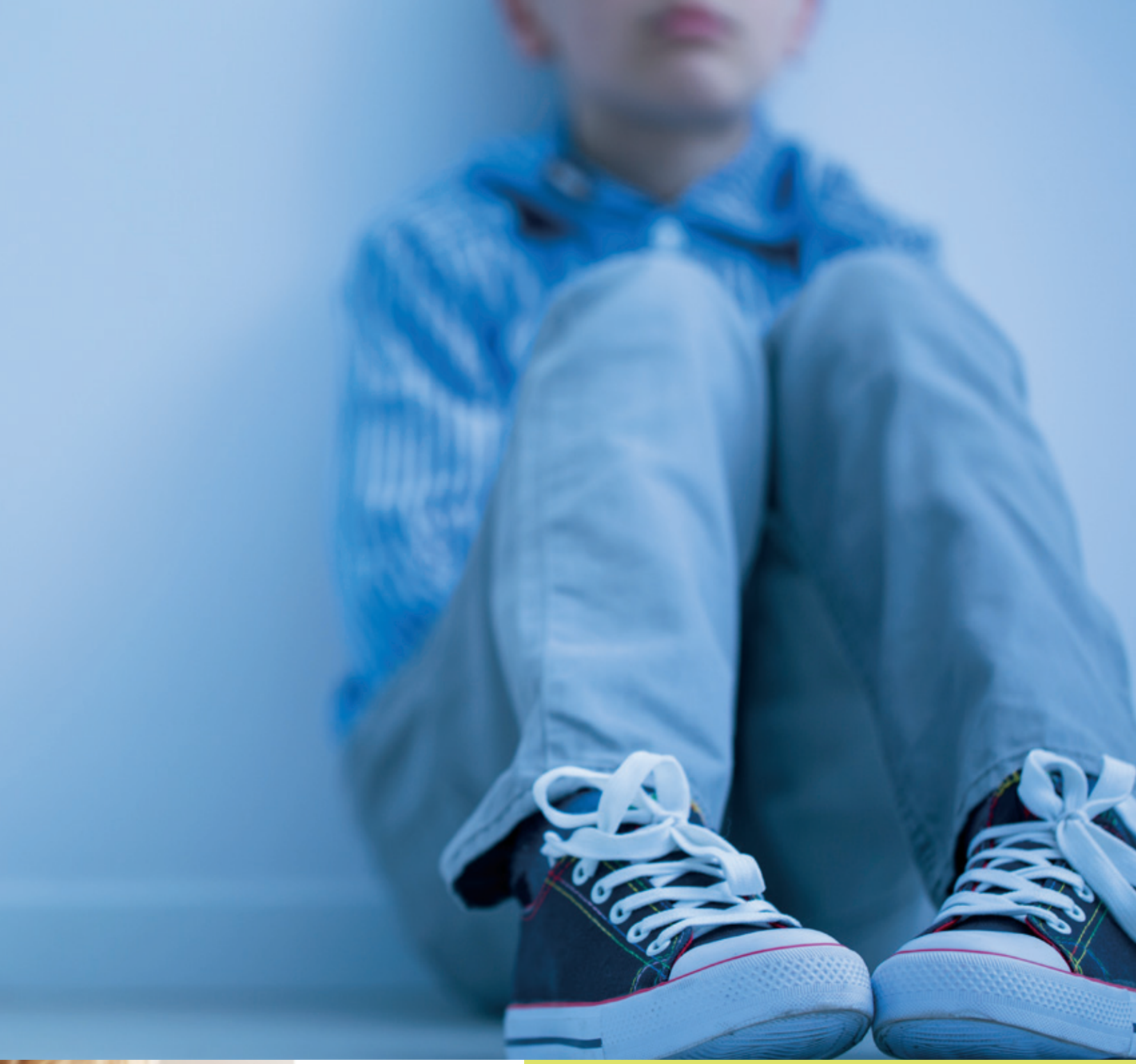
Military children at all ages and stages experience natural emotional reactions to big changes in their lives. Feeling sad when moving, worried when a parent deploys, and angry when their responsibilities increase are all normal and natural. These feelings do not necessarily mean that a child has a mental illness. There's a difference between a stress response and a mental illness. Military children can sometimes be more likely to experience mental health issues, given the unique nature of military family life. As parents, you want to be engaged and mindful so you are better equipped to identify what's going on and have resources when you need them.

When your child starts to show continued behavior changes, like temper tantrums, poor classroom behavior, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, or isolation from family and/or friends, then you may need to get them more attention. Watching out for these signals is a good first step. Then, validate your child's experience and communicate with your child to help them to more productively identify, express, and process these feelings. Ignoring the problem or hoping it will get better on its own can have some serious consequences and make the problem worse.

If your child has an underlying mental health disorder, then it will be more difficult for that child to effectively cope with stressors. If you see your child experiencing prolonged symptoms of stress that go on a month or more, or if your child has experienced a trauma, then it is important to seek help from a mental health professional. This can prevent the development of a mental health disorder or lessen the effects of the stressor. Military families may want to try to get ahead of a potential problem, if you know a stressor like a move or deployment is coming up.

Considerations for a child with a mental illness

Unfortunately, mental illness still comes with some stigma attached. Military families may expect a slightly more complicated landscape of systems and circumstances to navigate. It helps to understand that having a child with a mental illness does not make you a failure. On the contrary, you're advocating for your child and working to get your child the help they need. You're not ignoring a problem. You're ready to face it head-on and get through it together as the strong military family you are.



As parents, you want to be engaged and mindful so you are better equipped to identify what's going on and have resources when you need them.

Some signs and symptoms that could indicate your child may have a mental illness can include any or a combination of:

- Persistent feelings of sadness
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy, or problems sleeping
- Bizarre thinking not based in reality (delusions), paranoia, or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger, hostility, or violence
- Suicidal thinking

Other signs of mental illness can include increased irrational or dangerous behavior, seeing or hearing things that aren't real, unexplained fear, self-harm (cutting, scratching, etc.), increased defiance or disrespect, changes in appearance and interests, lying and/or manipulating behavior, or problems with hygiene and self-care.

A mental illness also can involve physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain, etc. If a child experiences any of these symptoms – or a combination of them – and they are pervasive, then you should schedule an appointment with a physician or mental health care provider.

In the military, stressors apply to the whole family. If parents are also experiencing symptoms like anxiety, depression, or mood issues, then it's harder to effectively respond to the increased needs of a distressed child. A counselor or therapist can help support both you and your child through this time.

Getting the help you need

Military families have lots of options to get help for your child. A pediatrician may help confirm your concerns and guide you to the next step of treatment. A school counselor may also have insight about resources available at school or in your community. You may also find support communities and programs available on base through family services offices. Not all installations provide the same types of pediatric care. Parents may also have the option to choose services that Tricare Insurance covers for providers who practice off-post. Veterans Services usually offer adult and family counseling, and can help parents find child therapy and medical treatment in the community at the parents' request.

You may feel like you're repeating yourself, but don't assume that the provider you're working with understands your child's history. Keep track of your records and be sure to keep asking questions if you don't feel like you're getting solid answers.

Treatment generally requires more than one component, including therapy, sometimes medication, and family/friend support. Also, the child should be personally involved in finding a successful outcome.

These are some other affordable care options that can help:

- Military OneSource has resources to support relocation and transition, special needs, health and wellness coaching, confidential non-medical counseling, and more. www.militaryonesource.mil
- Mental Health America works with people to connect them with affordable mental-health services in their communities. www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- Community health centers and community mental health centers in your community may also be able to help.
- Employee assistance programs, places of worship, group therapy, online cognitive behavioral therapy are other resources to investigate to help your child's mental health.

In the military, stressors apply to the whole family. If parents are also experiencing symptoms like anxiety, depression, or mood issues, then it's harder to effectively respond to the increased needs of a distressed child.

Closing **words**

Parents are the first and most important role models for your children. They 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: Is your family prepared for changes and challenges?

How prepared is your family to face any of the following challenges?

Note: Fill out with your partner, if applicable.

A deployment:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

A move:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

A wounded warrior situation:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

A painful family change:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

Transition or retirement:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

A special need child:
☐ very ready ☐ ready ☐ not very ready ☐ not at all ready ☐ not applicable

How will you handle these situations if they arise?

A deployment:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

A move:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

A wounded warrior situation:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

A painful family change:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

Transition or retirement:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

A special need child:
☐ ourselves ☐ with family support ☐ with military support ☐ with professional help

MY PLAN

In this next part, make a plan for what you think is most critical for your family in the next 12 months. For example, if your partner is deployed, your most critical plan may be to prepare for his/her return. If one of you is considering retiring or separating from the military, then that would be the next one.

As a result of reading this handbook, here are three things that are most important for my child(ren) and my family:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Here is the one thing my spouse/partner and I are committed to doing right now:

What: _____

Here are additional things my spouse/partner and I will work on in the near future:

What: _____

When: _____

What: _____

When: _____

What: _____

When: _____

Here are some things we can stop doing or put on hold for now so that we can take care of our child(ren), ourselves, and our relationship:

_____

Here are the most important contacts and groups to help support us:

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

BOOK LIST

Military Culture

A Marine's Tail: Chesty Goes to Boot Camp
Brandon Barnett, 2011

A Salute to Our Heroes: The U.S. Marines
Brandon Barnett, 2010

Alpha Bravo Charlie: The Military Alphabet
Chris Demarest, 2005

Goodnight Marines
David Dixon, 2016

H is for Honor: A Military Family Alphabet
Devin Scillian, 2006

Hero Dad
Melinda Hardin, 2010

Hero Mom
Melinda Hardin, 2013

Joining Forces with Glory
Lisa Mallen, 2011

Let's Go Air Force!
Yumi Lafortune, 2013

My First Counting Book
Cindy Entin, 2013
*Available in Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marines

Piper Reed, Navy Brat
Kimberly Willis Holt, 2008

Robby the C-130 Goes to Germany
Beth Mahoney, 2009

Robby the C-130 Goes to Hawaii
Beth Mahoney, 2011

Veterans: Heroes in Our Neighborhood
Varlerie Pfundstein, 2013

Deployment

A Paper Hug
Stephanie Skolmoski, 2006

All Hands on Deck! Dad's Coming Home!
Julia Maki, 2012

American Hero Books: My Daddy Is a Marine
Alia Reese, 2011

A Year Without Dad
Jodi Brunson, 2003
* For child of a reserve/national guard family

A Yellow Ribbon for Daddy
Anissa Mersiowsky, 2005

Boo Boo Bear's Mission: The True Story of a Teddy Bear's Adventure in Iraq
Mary Linda Sather, 2009

Brave Like Me
Barbara Kerley, 2016

But…What If?
Sandra Miller Linhart, 2010

Coming Home
Greg Ruth, 2014

Countdown 'til Daddy Gets Home
Kristin Ayyar, 2013

Countdown 'til Mommy Comes Home
Kristin Ayyar, 2017

Daddy's Boots
Sandra Miller Linhart, 2010

Daddy's in Iraq, but I Want Him Back
Carmen Hoyt, 2005

Dear Baby, I'm Watching Over You
Carol Casey, 2010

Deployment: One of Our Pieces is Missing
Julia Cook, 2018

Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops
Jill Biden, 2012

Heart of a Shepherd
Rosanne Parry, 2010
*For child of a reserve/national guard family

Home Again
Dorinda Silver Williams, 2009

I am Red, White, and Blue…Are You Feeling it Too?
Deanna Lynn Cole, 2008

I'm a Hero Too
Jenny Sokol, 2007
*Mommy and Daddy versions available

I Miss You!: A Military Kid's Book About Deployment
Beth Andrews, 2007

I Wish Daddy Was Here
Katherine DeMille, 2009

Lily Hates Goodbyes
Jerilyn Marler, 2011
*Navy and All-military versions available

Love, Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mom
Lisa Tucker McElroy, 2005

Meet Robby the C-130
Beth Mahoney, 2008

Momma's Boots
Sandra Miller Linhart, 2010

My Daddy is a Guardsman
Kirk and Sharron Hilbrecht, 2002
* For child of a reserve/national guard family

My Daddy is a Hero
Chad, Childers, 2007

My Daddy is an Airman
Kirk and Sharron Hilbrecht, 2005

My Daddy is a Soldier
Anne Stratford, 2008

My Daddy is in the Air Force
Nick Hoth, 2010

My Daddy, My Hero
Katie Karnes, 2010

My Daddy Sleeps Everywhere
Jesse Franklin, 2017

My Daddy is a Green Beret
Amber Marie, 2017

My Dad's a Hero
Rebecca Christiansen and Jewel Armstrong, 2007

My Father's Shirt
Sally Huss, 2015

My Hero Doesn't Wear a Cape
Gloria Canada, 2013

My Mom is Going Away But She Will Be Back One Day!
James Thomas, 2014

My Mommy Wears Combat Boots
Sharon McBride, 2008

My Navy Dad
Tracy Richards, 2010

My Red Balloon
Eve Bunting, 2005

My Sailor Dad
Ross Mackenzie, 2008

Night Catch
Brenda Ehrmantraut, 2005

Over There (Daddy and Mommy versions)
Dorinda Silver Williams, 2006
*Downloadable PDF on Zero to Three website allows you to add your own pictures to the book

Red, White, and Blue Good-bye
Sarah Wones Tomp, 2005

Super Mom and Dad: Military Heroes!
Seth Waltman, 2016

The Homecoming Box
Kathleen Edick and Paula Johnson, 2011

The Wishing Tree
Mary Redman, 2008

When Daddy's Gone
Jamilah Stanfield, 2012

When Dad's at Sea
Mindy Pelton, 2004

When Duty Calls (Uncle Sam's Kids)
Angela Sportelli Rehak, 2004

Where Were You?
Tracy Hancock, 2015

While You Are Away
Eileen Spinelli, 2004

Coping with Injury, Death, or Missing In Action

A Kid's Journey of Grief, TAPS Edition: Coloring and Activity Book for Grieving Military Kids
Susan Beeney and Jo Anne Chung, 2005

A Soldier's Star: The Love and Loss Between a Parent and Child
Deborah Petty, 2008

Daddy's Home
Carolina Nadel, 2010

Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent who has Experienced Trauma
Michelle Sherman and DeAnne Sherman, 2005

Helping My Hero!!: A Guide for Young Readers Whose Parents May Have Combat Trauma
Sherry Barron, 2015

Hero at Home
Sarah Verando, 2018

I Need Dad and Dad Needs Me: A Loving Lesson about Post-Traumatic Stress for Families
Connee Gorman, 2012

Is Your Dad a Pirate?
Tara McClary Reeves, 2017

My Daddy Has PTSD
Casey Sean Harmon, 2015

My Dad Got Hurt. What Can I Do?: Helping Military Children Cope with a Brain-Injured Parent
National Academy of Neuropsychology Foundation, 2017

My Hero Hurts!!: A Study Guide for Teenagers Whose Parents May Have Combat Trauma
Sherry Barron, 2015

Operation Yes
Sara Lewis Holmes, 2009

Our Daddy is Invincible!
Shannon Maxwell, 2010

Somewhere Special
Sarah White, 2008

Sparrow
Dorinda Silver Williams, 2012
*Available in both Mommy and Daddy versions

Still My Dad
Julia A. Maki, 2013

The Healing Heroes Book: Braving the Changes When Someone You Love is Wounded in Service
Ellen Sabin, 2012

The Hero in My Pocket
Marlene Lee, 2005

When Daddy Comes Home: A Children's Book on PTSD
Maggie Hundshamer, 2016

Why Is Dad So Mad?
Seth Kastle, 2015
*Also available in a Mom version

Moving

Army Brats
Daphne Benedis-Grab, 2017

Before I Leave
Jessixa Bagley, 2016

Berenstain Bears Moving Day
Stan and Jan Berenstain, 1981

But Mom, I Don't Want to Move!: Easing the Impact of Moving on Your Children
Susan Miller, 2004

Flexible Wings
Veda Stamps, 2015

Home is Where Our Hero is
Bridgett Plat, 2016

Home is Where the Air Force Sends You
Rebekah Sanderlin and Melissa Davis, 2014
*Also available in Army, Marine Corps, and Navy versions

Kids! We Have PCS Orders!
James Thomas, 2018

Military Brats: The Worst Best Move Ever
Yuki and Carlos Smiley, 2016

Piper Read Forever Friend
Kimberly Willis Holt, 2012

The Kid in the Red Jacket
Barbara Park, 1988

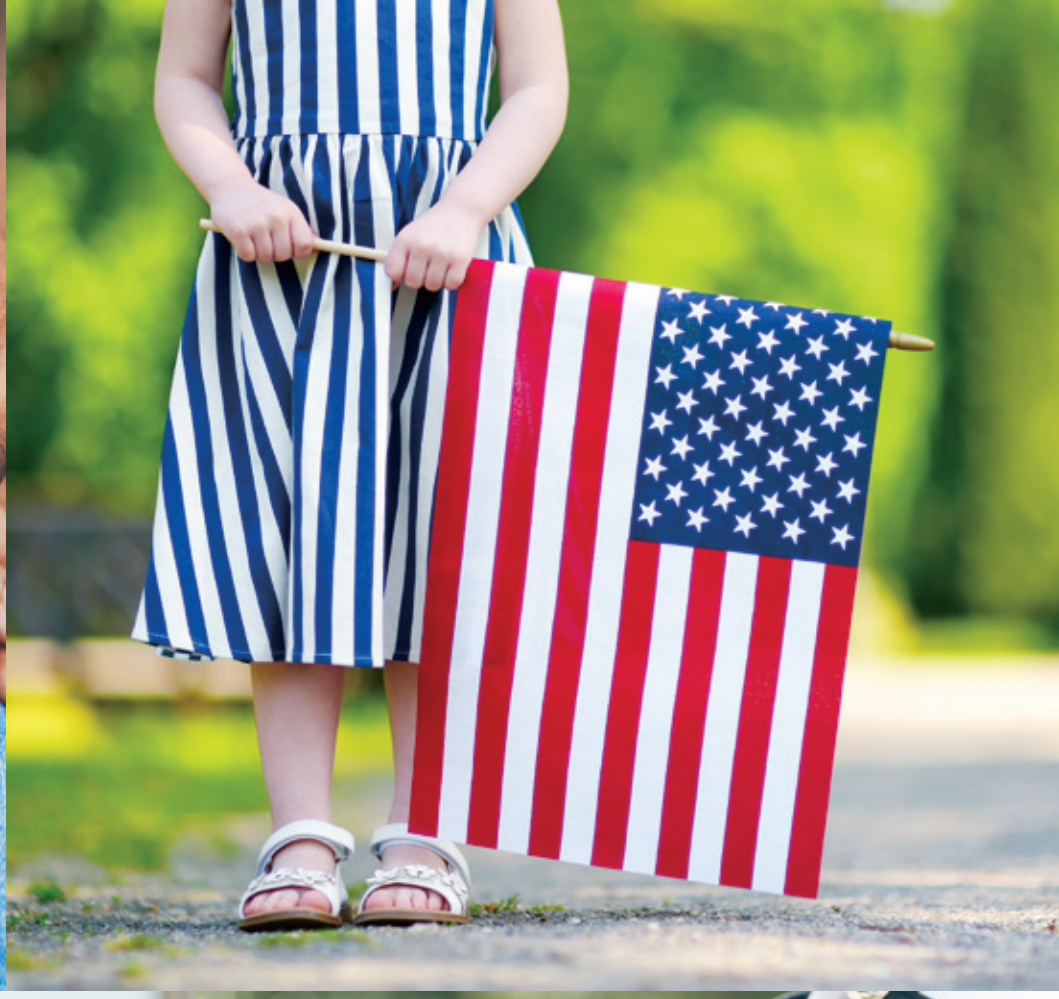
The Year My Parents Ruined My Life
Martha Freeman, 1997

We're Moving Today! A Moving Story
James Thomas, 2014

Who Will Be My Friends?
Syd Hoff, 1988

Online Resources

www.sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org
www.militaryonesource.mil
www.militarykidsconnect.dcoe.mil
www.militarychild.org
www.militaryfamily.org/kids-operation-purple
www.comfortcrew.org/militaryheroes.html
www.operationwearehere.com



one in five minds
advocates for children's mental health

www.1in5minds.org