

Kinship Caregivers: Understanding Children and the Military Deployment Cycle¹

Elizabeth Thomas and Larry F. Forthun²

Introduction

The deployment of a military parent is accompanied by many changes within the family. This is especially true if children are being cared for by a relative such as a grandparent, sibling, aunt, or uncle during deployment. These relatives are known as kinship caregivers. For kinship caregivers, understanding the basics of what is involved in a military deployment is vital to ensure a healthy transition for the children. Many kinship caregivers, especially those serving as caregivers for the children of guard or reserve service members, do not understand the basics of the deployment process. Having a better grasp of what to expect while the service member is deployed will lead to a more secure and stable home environment.

Military professionals who work with families have identified several phases that families go through during a parent's deployment (Graham 2007; La Greca et al. 2003). These phases are defined not only by what is happening in the deployment process, but also by emotional changes and challenges children experience when a parent deploys. Deployment occurs in almost every branch of the military, and the experience differs for each family and each family member. To reflect the diversity of experiences, military professionals have proposed various models of the deployment cycle to assist families in the transition (Graham 2007; La Greca et al. 2003). Although each model has some unique differences, there are at least five phases that are common across models: pre-deployment, deployment,



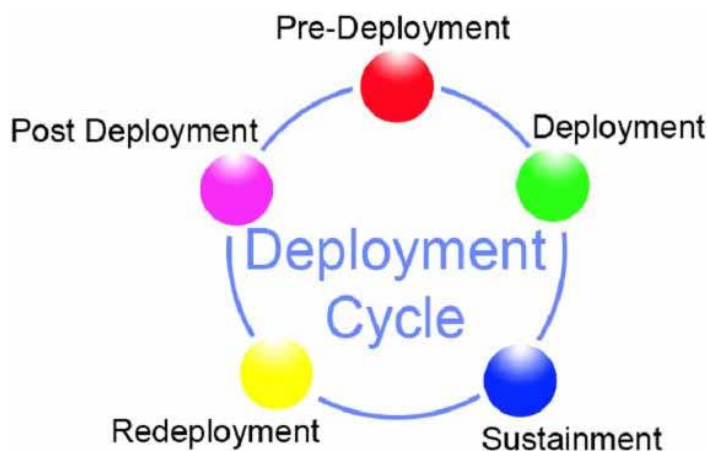
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sustainment, preparation (also known as redeployment), and reunification (or home-coming). Recognizing that each family is unique, this deployment cycle, as summarized below, is intended not as a rule-book but as a helpful *guide* to families as they experience deployment of a parent.

Pre-deployment

The pre-deployment phase includes the period of time when the parent learns of the deployment until the time the parent actually leaves (Graham 2007). It can be anywhere from a week to a year, depending on how much notice the parent is given. During this time, the parent's responsibilities to the military may increase with more time spent away from home (La Greca et al. 2003). The parent may also

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2. Elizabeth Thomas, student, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; and Larry F. Forthun, assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.



begin to emotionally detach from the family in preparation for the deployment.

Children are likely to feel a range of emotions during this phase, including anger that the parent has to leave, fear for the future, and/or anxiety about how things at home will change. Communication between family members is important. Children need to be reassured that the parent is away because of training and preparation for the deployment (Graham 2007). It is important to remember to use age-appropriate communication; toddlers and elementary-age children may not understand the complexities of a deployment, while pre-teens and teenagers are likely to be aware of the dangers associated with a deployment.

What You Can Do

Meet with the parent and children before the deployment to discuss the transitions that may occur (e.g., a new home, new school, or new friends). Learn about the children's routines and do your best to integrate their routines into your own. If the children will be attending a different school and making new friends, talk about ways that this transition can be made easier. If attending a new school, you can reassure the children that they will be involved in the similar school or community activities. Facilitate making friends by suggesting they invite classmates or peers over. Getting to know parents of the child's peers may also help the child feel welcomed into the new environment.

If you were not an active part of the pre-deployment process with the family, it is important to understand what parents said to their children about the deployment. You may find that you will have to explain very basic things, such as the parent's current location, where the parent will be going, and that the parent is well-trained and will be as safe as possible. A younger child will need consistent reassurance that the parent did not leave because of something they did or did not do.

Suggested Activity

Attend a family meeting between the deploying parent and the children. With the children's parent present, discuss with the children the changes that will be happening. Reassure the children that you are not replacing their parent but will be there to care for them and keep them safe. Also, reassure the children that you will, to the best of your ability, maintain a regular schedule for school and after school activities, friends and play dates, family dinners, and other evening activities. Allow the children to talk and ask questions.

Deployment

The deployment phase begins when the parent leaves and continues until the parent is established at the deployed location. More than any other phase, the deployment phase is characterized by transition. It can take several weeks for the parent to arrive at the designated location and, as a result, communication can be very sporadic. Likewise, the children may be moving into your home, which may be in a different neighborhood or town. The children may have to enter a new school in the middle of the academic year and learn to make new friends.

During this phase, the children's feelings may intensify as the reality of the deployment sets in (U.S. Department of Defense (n.d.)). Children may begin to experience fear, anxiety, sadness, or anger for the first time. As a result, this phase may be the most challenging as you and the children learn to adjust to new responsibilities, new routines, and new surroundings.

What You Can Do

Remind the children that it is common for communication with the parent to be sporadic during the deployment process and to not assume the worst if they don't hear from their parent for several days or perhaps even weeks. Do your best to maintain normal routines and have weekly family meetings to discuss meal plans, medical appointments, and extracurricular activities. Include children on any changes that need to be made. This will help them learn to trust you, too. Work with children and teens to write letters to the parent, even if they can't be sent yet. Encourage them to keep a journal. This can be therapeutic and will help them organize their feelings.

Suggested Activity

Something as simple as planning meals for the week can help give children a sense of security. Write a family meal plan, leaving one day blank for each child to pick the meal.

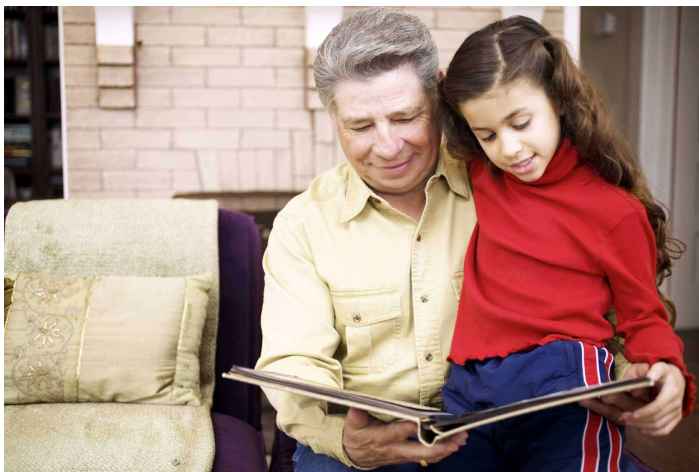
Likewise, journaling can be as simple as noting major events that happened throughout the day and the feelings associated with those events. To help encourage children to journal, practice journaling yourself. Write out events from the previous day, including feelings you may have experienced, what led to those feelings, and what you did to help overcome negative feelings. Share your journal entry with the children and encourage them to share their entries with you, if they would like to.

Sustainment

The sustainment phase of the deployment cycle includes the period of time when the parent arrives at the designated location until the time to begin preparations for returning home. For the kinship caregiver, the sustainment phase involves settling into the new routine with the children. Stress reactions to the parent's deployment, such as anxiety, anger, and sadness, will typically begin to subside as the children establish regular communication with the deployed parent (Levin, Daynard, and Dexter 2008). Likewise, the anxiety about the transition to a new environment will likely begin to subside as the children become comfortable with the established responsibilities and routines.

What You Can Do

Help foster communication between the deployed parent and the children. Encourage letter writing and emails to supplement telephone and Internet conversations. Also, continue to ask children about what they are thinking and feeling. Try to model positive ways of coping such as taking time to have fun, developing and maintaining friendships, and limiting the viewing of news media that discuss military actions.



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Suggested Activity

Create a Deployment "Grab-Bag" (CNIC Communications 2010). Fill any type of bag with scraps of paper that have activities written on them, such as go to the zoo, make cookies, read a book, or take a walk. Only write down activities that you are able to do and can afford to do. On activity days, draw an item from the bag and do the activity with the children. Send a picture of you and the children doing the activity to the deployed parent. Activities can be drawn as frequently as will fit in with your schedule (i.e., weekly or monthly).

Preparation

The preparation phase consists of the final weeks of the deployment when the parent begins to make the transition back home. As in the deployment phase, communication with the parent will typically be sporadic. Children are likely to feel nervous or anxious about living with their parent again, and may feel guilty for feeling this way. They may feel nervous for a variety of reasons. For example, the children may feel like they grew up a lot during the deployment but the parent will come home and take away new responsibilities they have gained or "treat them like children" again. They may also be nervous that the parent will be different. These are normal concerns (Levin, Daynard, and Dexter 2008).

What You Can Do

Reassure children that it is normal to feel nervous about the parent's return home and that it does not mean that they don't miss the parent. Ask children how they are feeling about the parent returning home and discuss some of their concerns with them. Remind them it may take a few weeks for things to return to normal (Graham 2007). Talk to children about how you will keep in touch with them, as they may fear separation from you, too.

Suggested Activity

A deployed parent will likely have a better idea of the return date during this phase, so it is common to begin making a countdown calendar (Levin, Daynard, and Dexter 2008). You may want to leave off an exact return date because it will likely change. Think of other activities to include on a countdown calendar, such as birthdays, games, recitals, school plays, or special trips. Including these on the calendar will provide children with "milestone" activities to look forward to, and may help the time go by more smoothly.

Reunification (Homecoming)

Reunification includes both the homecoming of the deployed parent and the adjustment to being together as a family again, especially for the parent who has spent so much time as a deployed member of the military (Palmer 2008). A range of feelings will likely surround the parent's homecoming. Infants and toddlers may need time to get to know the parent again; elementary-aged children may view the parent as a hero and become overly clingy; and teens may become resentful because they fear their new freedoms and responsibilities might be taken away when their parent returns (Palmer 2008).

What You Can Do

To help prepare children for homecoming, acknowledge their feelings and let them know that they are normal concerns. For younger children, especially toddlers, show pictures and/or videos of the deployed parent as the homecoming date gets closer to help ease the reunification process. Communication through e-mails and letter writing will also smooth the transition. Involve children in discussions of new responsibilities before the parent's return.

Suggested Activity

Plan how you will celebrate the parent's return. A large homecoming party may be overwhelming, but smaller celebrations, like a special family dinner at home, will help children feel involved in their parent's homecoming.

Conclusion

Each phase in the deployment cycle is characterized by changes in relationships between family members, changes in emotional reactions to the deployment, and changes in responsibilities and routines. Understanding these changes and knowing what to expect during the deployment will help you to be better prepared for your new responsibilities and make the transition much easier for the children.

Web Resources

Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists, or SOFAR, is an organization dedicated to providing online resources to military families related to deployment, preventing crises, and managing acute problems. <http://www.sofarusa.org>

The National Military Family Association is an organization aimed at supporting military families that is made up of military families; the staff consists of spouses, parents, and family members of military. <http://militaryfamily.org>

Military Youth on the Move is a website for military children from elementary to high school. This website addresses issues with youth related to deployment, moving, and making new friends. <http://apps.militaryonesource.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=123:HOME2:0::NO>

The Military Families Learning Network serves military family service professionals through engaged online communities in the areas of families, parents, and children. <http://www.extension.org/militaryfamilies>

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