

Child Reactions to Parental Deployment

Very Young Children (Birth - 6 years)

It's hard to predict how children will react to a parent's deployment. Learning more about how children of various ages may react can help parents better support their children. The following are common reactions you can expect to see in very young children.



Infants • 12 Months and Younger

Infants are likely to respond to changes in their schedule, physical environment, or in the availability of caregivers. Such disruptions in infant care can lead to refusal to eat, weight loss, frequent crying, or difficulty being consoled. Caretaker distress may also have an impact on infant activities and reactions.



Toddlers • 1 - 3 Years

Toddlers generally take cues from their primary caregiver. If the non-deploying parent is available and coping well, a toddler is likely to cope well. When adjusting to change, a toddler may become more tearful, throw temper tantrums, or experience shift in eating and sleeping patterns.



Preschoolers • 3 - 6 Years

Preschoolers have a clearer awareness of the absence of a parent than do younger children. When experiencing such stress, children may become clingy, suck their thumb more often, wet the bed, have changes in sleep, or experience anxiety around separation from parents. They may display signs of irritability, low energy, moodiness, and aggression, or they may complain of headaches, stomachaches, and sleep problems. Due to their active imaginations, preschoolers may develop their own explanations about the deployment of a parent, e.g., "Daddy/ Mommy left because I was angry at him/ her."

What you can do:

- It can be tough to balance all of the needs of young children while taking good care of yourself. Use play dates and support from others to help. Making sure that you are taking care of yourself will help both you and baby with the transitions that deployment brings.
- Try to maintain your children's routines as much as possible. It is important to maintain consistent activities, such as school, play groups, and stable bed time and mealtime routines. Introducing any changes in routine gradually, rather than abruptly, may help prevent challenges and increase your child's ability to cope with transitions.
- You can reassure young children by providing positive attention, continued affection (hugging, kissing, cuddling), and by maintaining family routines.
- Set aside time to play with your child. Play is how young children learn about the world and it is fun! It also reinforces their positive relationship with you.
- If young children feel that they are the cause of their parent leaving, you can gently correct these beliefs. These can best be addressed through simple, matter-of-fact, but accurate, information related to the deployment.