From Diapers to Military Duty: Serving Young Children in Military and Veteran Families

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UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center
# Nathanson Family Resilience Center Services and Programs

## Education and Support Services
- LA County Department of Mental Health Training
- Nathanson Family Resource Center
- UCLA Family STAR Clinic

## Family Prevention Programs
- Family Development Project
- FOCUS Family Resiliency Training™
- SEEDS
- STRIVE

## Military Family Initiatives
- National Military Family Association Operation Purple® Camps
- Operation Mend
- Project FOCUS
- Welcome Back Veterans Family Resilience Center
Presentation Goals

• Increase awareness about an emerging public health need
• Describe the unique challenges for young children in military and veteran families
• Highlight the importance of a family-level approach to promote positive marital, co-parenting, and parent-child relationships for military and veteran families
• Provide suggestions for adapting best-practices to best meet the needs of military and veteran families
Military Values

Honor
Loyalty
Excellence
Commitment
Integrity
Courage
Duty
Respect
Service
Challenges of Military and Veteran Families

- Extended and repeated separations from a primary caregiver in the context of danger
- Altered family roles and responsibilities
- Increased stress on caretaking parent
- Media and communication exposure
Challenges of Military and Veteran Families

- Community level stress/loss
- Impact of combat exposure on returning parent
- Possible parental mental health problems, physical injury, or loss
Reacting to Reactions:
- Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, scattered
- Feeling like a “bad parent”
- Upset at inability to “handle this”
Deployment and Reintegration
Stress in At Home Spouses

- Caretaking burden for spouse
- Increased loneliness and isolation
- Limited social support and resources
- Limited co-parenting
- Concerns about danger
- Anxiety and depression
- Relational dissatisfaction, conflict, reduced trust and intimacy
Impact of Absence

Being “Mom” and “Dad”
• Childcare
• Home Maintenance
• “Being in two places at the same time”
• Emotionally supporting children
• Coping with worries about spouse
Reminders of Separation

28 yr old Marine mother, 1 month post-reunion after 2 deployments in 2 years

“..It’s the craziest thing.. For the first few weeks after I came back, every morning, my 3-year-old would stop me at the door and hang onto my leg and wouldn’t let me leave. I had to change out of my uniform and get into civilian clothes before she would let me leave the house. Even now, I have to sneak out of the house with my uniform in a paper bag and change on the way to the Base.”
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 child’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 your 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.
Military Families are Strong
Resilience & Protective Factors

- Supportive relationships with parents and adults
- Spending time together as a family
- Authoritative parenting
- Routines and rituals that promote closeness during hardships
- Children with at least one secure attachment figure
- Network of support: family, friends, school, community
- Participation in extracurricular and other activities
- Helpful beliefs and making positive meaning
Serve the Family

Stress reverberates across the family
Stress accumulates
Family centered interventions reduce risk and promote resilience in service members, spouses and children
FOCUS – Early Childhood Family Resilience Training

Parents Only

Parents Only

Parents Only

Parents Only

Parents & Child

Parents & Child

Parents & Child

Sessions 1 & 2

Session 3

Session 4

Session 5

Session 6
Goals for FOCUS for Early Childhood

Help parents understand the parenting role, coparenting relationship, and the internal world of the child in the context of the deployment narrative

Understand the developmental needs of their child and what to expect as the child grows

Enhance the parent-child relationship

Teach the parent how to play

Help the parent to have enjoyable family experiences

Prepare for future separations and coparenting at a distance
FOCUS Family Resilience Training Core Components

Family Resilience Check-In

When parents have a clear picture of their family’s strengths and relative weaknesses, they can better identify targeted areas of attention. This works best when it is not a one-time event; rather, it is a process that families go through across the lifespan.

Family-Specific Psychoeducation

With access to appropriate information, parents can make better and more coordinated decisions as the leaders of their family.
Family Narrative Timeline

**Perspective taking:** Understanding another’s point of view, imagining how another person has experienced the same situation.

**Meaning making:** Understanding how the family’s experience has helped them to overcome certain challenges and made them stronger in unexpected ways. In other words, how the family is able to “find the silver lining.”
Family Level Resilience Skills

**Emotional regulation:** Allows for a family to appropriately express a wide range of emotions and to be responsive to the emotional needs of others.

**Problem solving:** Allows for the family to address challenges in an organized, step-by-step manner. Focuses more on the process of finding effective solutions.
FOCUS Family Resilience Training Core Components

Family Level Resilience Skills (cont’d)

Communication: Allows for one to express their own experience and preferences while also listening and understanding those of another person.

Managing reminders: Allows families to recognize when a reminder might be at work and resulting in emotional and behavioral activation. Also allows for a plan to address this activation.

Readiness & goal setting: Allows for families to set and achieve appropriate family goals.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner 1</th>
<th>Partner 2</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to eat dinner as a family.</td>
<td>A SET ROUTINE IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR CHILD’S DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>- We have dinner together 2 nights a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality time with the kids is most important, and I’m too tired for much else.</td>
<td>NOT ENOUGH 1-ON-1 TIME</td>
<td>- SATURDAY FAMILY DINNERS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Our toddler needs emotional support and comforting when he cries.</td>
<td>CHILDREN NEED DISCIPLINE TO BE STRONG FOR LIFE’S CHALLENGES</td>
<td>- Dale night each month</td>
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<td>- HAVE GRANDMA SPEND MORE TIME WITH KIDS</td>
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<td>- Set down a plan for co-parenting</td>
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Communication about Children’s Fears

Child’s Concept of Deployment
- Can be scarier than reality
- Influenced by movies, video games, media
Reminders of Loss

26-year-old Soldier father, 7 months post-reunion. One of his buddies died in his arms during a fire fight:

“...if my daughter falls asleep when I hold her, and suddenly her head falls, I can’t describe what it does to me... I immediately wake her up... I am convinced at that moment that she is dead...”
Feeling Fox Paper Doll
FOCUS On the Go! is an educational app that helps families become stronger in the face of challenges. Games and resources help families practice skills, such as identifying emotions, solving problems, and improving communication.
Children showed a reduction in total problems ($p < .001$)
Based on baseline vs. post intervention SDQ medium difficulty
N = 225 boys and 167 girls
Children showed an increase in prosocial behaviors (p < .001)
Based on baseline vs. post intervention SDQ medium difficulty
N = 225 boys and 167 girls
Both service member and civilian parents reported improvements in their family’s functioning, including more effective problem solving, communication, affective responsiveness, and behavior control (p < .001). Based on baseline vs. post intervention healthy FAD means. N = 205 service members and 373 civilian parents.
Both service members and spouses reported significant reductions in depression \((p < .001)\) and anxiety \((p < .001)\) based on baseline vs. post intervention BSI means. 

\(N = 174\) service members and \(383\) civilian parents.
A Call to Action

• “As America asks more of these families, they have a right to expect more of us. This is our moral obligation.”
  - First Lady Michelle Obama, May 12, 2010 at the National Military Family Association Military Family Summit

• “What I’m asking of communities is to just open up your lenses, to include in your outreach, these [military] families.”
  - ADM Mike Mullen, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, comments during a town hall meeting, Chambersburg, PA
Thank You!

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