

Infant's, Toddler's, & Preschooler's (0-5 years):

Infants sense or absorb emotions from their parents. Young children can often feel more than they can explain or understand.

Reactions to Deployment

- Sad, confused, and irritable
- Fuss, cry, clingy, and more difficult to comfort
- Display aggression, frustration, or temper
- Regress to outgrown behaviors, such as thumb sucking, baby talking, or toileting accidents
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Pretend play, trying to make sense out of the situation
- Reintegration: Shy, withdrawn, or frightened by the returning parent-Soldier

Developmental Needs and Understanding of Deployment

- Need securely attached parent-child relationships—based on trust. Needs a caregiver that is sensitive, loving, consistent, and responsive to their discomforts to help them feel secure and ensure the development of trusting rather than mistrusting relationships.
- Feel and sense more emotions than they understand—Infants and toddlers absorb the experiences around them and the way parents handle them. Their misbehavior during difficult times is indicative of their frustration and feelings. It is more helpful if parents identify and address the child's need causing the misbehavior rather than punishing the misbehavior. Teach children to help them learn rather than punish.
- Are sensitive to parent's mood and emotions—They take cues from their parent and caregiver. If parent is coping well, then children will tend to do well. Professional counseling and community services can provide resources and support related to parenting.
- Understand concrete ideas—Avoid ideas, values, or faith beliefs that are abstract and thus can be frightening.
- Are eager to learn—Answer repeated questions, explain using pictures, and avoid details that might frighten.
- Feel anxiety when parent-Soldier leaves and returns—Take it slow. Allow young children time to adjust by having group hugs, playing from a distance, taking cues from the child, and waiting for child to reach out. Then participate in care giving duties such as bathing, playing, feeding, and putting child to bed.

School-Age Children's (6-12 years):

School-age children are experiencing a dynamic stage of change and transition. As they mature, they sometimes teeter totter between being a young child and becoming a teen.

Reactions to Deployment

- Irritable, angry, confused, worried, or depressed
- Aggressive, mood swings, or say hurtful things
- Display problems at school or home
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Guilt or resentment, complain of stomach ache
- Disinterest in school, recreation, and friends
- Reintegration: Act grown up, want to please and impress

Developmental Needs and Understanding of Deployment

- Are capable of thinking more critically—They understand more about deployment, values, beliefs, and faith. They rely on parents providing honest, accurate, and reliable information. When parents are diligent in thinking together with children by making explicit how to think through tough decisions, children develop thinking and coping skills.
- Are becoming more responsible and independent—Being more aware of the realities of deployment, they may feel capable of taking on responsibilities. Parents need to allow more opportunities to be responsible, but not too much. Children need distractions from the stress of deployment too. Allow more freedom and encourage relationships with friends. Provide more space and privacy, but continue to monitor and supervise. Keep alert and “clued in” to children and how to support them.
- Have difficulty expressing emotions; confusion about feelings—Model and help children develop ways to communicate, cope, and think critically through their feelings, how to handle them, and what to believe.
- Fear when Soldier parent leaves—Provide open, honest communication (communicate what information you know, i.e., You may not know when your Soldier is returning), and think critically together to help children handle their fears. Focus on the fact that the parent-Soldier is well prepared for their job and has help from others.

Teenager's (13-18 years):

Every day, normal stressors during the teen years in conjunction with stressors due to deployment can tax adolescents' abilities to cope. While teenagers may look like adults, they are not.

Reactions to Deployment

- Withdrawn, isolated, lonely, or depressed
- Mixed feelings or mood swings
- Rebellious, disrespectful, angry, or lashing out
- Acting overly strong or mature
- Unconcerned or apathetic
- Changes in academic performance, problems at school
- Change in eating, or weight gain or loss
- Increased interest in friends
- Use of drugs or alcohol, or promiscuity
- Reintegration: Ignore or fear returning parent-Soldier

Developmental Needs and Understanding of Deployment

- Can think and reason at a higher level with parents. Teens understand deployment and dangers and are able to consider multiple possibilities, hypothetical circumstances and abstract ideas about faith, trust, and beliefs. When teenagers question parents, it is a good opportunity to be explicit about how and why rather than being offended. It is important for teenagers to make some decisions, but also important for parents to use a democratic style of discipline in which teens are carefully listened to, including effective communication and critical thinking, but parents ultimately set firm limits.

- Focus on developing their identity (Family, military, and friends)—Teens think about who they are, what they value and believe, what they are good at, and what they are willing to strive for. When parents have a strong, positive identification with the military, teenagers develop a more secure identity and are less confused about who their Family is and what is important to them. This applies to Family culture, heritage, faith, patriotism, ethics, values, and morals as well as the military identity.
- Need space to develop intimacy, friendships, and belong to a group; but not total freedom—need open, honest, and caring relationships. Teens seek out friends and try to pull away from parents. They may need some space, but do not need complete freedom. Parents need to stay in tune to needs, warning signs, and activities. Their bodies resemble adults, but emotionally and mentally they are not. Thus, they should not have extended unsupervised opportunities nor led to believe that participating in adult behaviors is healthy and acceptable. Furthermore, when parents model the behavior they expect, teens are more likely to respect the expectations parents have for them.
- Need to feel in control—Teens need to be listened to, allowed to participate in decision making that involves them, feel in control of their life, and feel support through firm limits.
- Are more responsible and independent—May feel the need to take on more responsibilities and worry about Soldier's safety when Soldier parent leaves. Have open, honest communication, but still set aside unnecessarily scary information about war and violence.