Q: I’ve recently seen a few families struggle with a parent’s military deployment. Are there any recommended approaches?

A: Military service places significant strains on a family. There are multiple family stress phases recognized around a deployment: predeployment, deployment, sustainment, late deployment, and then postdeployment. Communication restrictions and role transitions for service members and their families can create pitfalls during each of these phases.

When preparing for a deployment, it would be ideal for children to hear about what will be happening directly from their deploying parent rather than from others. This emphasizes the child’s importance to that parent. Particularly with younger children, the deploying parent might tell them why they serve to address fears that their parent might not want to be with them. Parents can also encourage their children to share questions or worries about the deployment, and be ready for this to happen at unscheduled times such as while riding in the car together. The goal is to keep them from bearing their worries alone.

Planning for special family times before deployment in which children (and spouses) get the deploying parent’s undivided attention can help with subsequent connectedness. The shared memories that are created, supplemented by photos or videos the child can view later, may help children cope once communication becomes more restricted. These special activities may also help to balance the normal predeployment transition where the soldier becomes emotionally and psychologically closer with their deploying service unit. Deployment preparation could feel like a rejection to some family members, summed up as “It feels like you’ve already left.”

The deploying parent can discuss what their deployment communication plan will be, such as email, phone, or internet video calls. Preparing them for the unpredictable nature of communication times can minimize hurt feelings later when connections do not happen when desired.

During the deployment itself, children will inevitably hear news about the area where their parent is deployed that raise concerns about that parent’s safety. Immediate family members may find it preferable for their own psychological well-being to listen to radio reports or read news stories rather than watching disturbing television news images. Older adolescents watching the news should ideally do so with an adult present to be able to discuss it together. To avoid unnecessary stress with young children, it is better not to have the television news on at all in their presence.

Nondeployed parents have to not only support their children, but also attend to their own psychological well-being. This usually means reaching out to friends, family, clergy, and other military families for support. Encouraging the parent to seek out their own personal time and supports is essential because we know kids cope better when their custodial parent has good emotional health.

Families will need to appreciate that when the parent returns from deployment, reintegration and adjustments will take many months. Striving to only make slow changes in parenting roles may avoid invalidating the remaining parent or alienating children. Many deployment

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adaptations will have to be unlearned upon returning home. For instance, a soldier’s deployment-related need for nocturnal alertness may result in sleeping difficulties at home, and a need for quick decision-making in the field may lead to irritability with friends or family. Parents struggling with reintegration, particularly if the returning soldier has developed posttraumatic stress disorder, should be encouraged to seek out professional assistance.

For younger ones, they may simply want to be seen and appreciated by their returning parent. One exercise to recommend is for the returning parent to tell each child two things that they are grateful for them doing during the deployment. The returning parent may also ask their child what was harder, what was easier, and what was different than they had imagined about the deployment. Parents should be prepared for their children to react differently at different ages; for instance, teenagers may appear not to care whereas a preschooler may be openly scared about future separations.

As treatment providers, we can also encourage our military families to engage more resources and assistance around deployments through the Department of Defense at www.militaryonesource.mil.

REFERENCE

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