

# *Staying Involved in Your Child's or Teenager's Life When You're Deployed*

## **Overview**

Ways to stay connected with your child or teenager during your deployment.

- What you can do before you deploy
- Staying involved while you're deployed
- How your spouse can help
- Resources

Keeping up with your family while you're deployed takes planning and effort. But your commitment to remain an important part of your child's or teenager's life can help both of you handle the challenges of deployment. At the same time it will reassure both of you that your connection will remain strong despite the miles between you.

## **What you can do before you deploy**

Before you leave, let your child or teenager know how important it is to you that you stay involved in her life. Talk about the challenges your family will face during the deployment and how being in close contact will give each of you emotional strength.

- *Find out what communication options will be available.* Your unit commander should be able to tell you whether you'll have computers and Internet access, and if so, whether you'll be able to e-mail, IM, or use video conferencing to stay in touch with your family. Also, find out whether you'll be able to send and receive packages regularly and whether you'll be able to use your cell phone for calling or texting.
- *Think about the different ways you might want to stay in touch.* Buy a few international calling cards if you will be relying on pay phones. If you don't already own a digital camera or video recorder, buy an inexpensive one so you can easily share your experiences with your spouse and child. If you'll have a reliable, high-speed Internet connection, you might also buy Web cams for yourself and for home so you can chat via video. You can also post videos for each other through the Military OneSource TroopTube program at [www.MilitaryOneSource.com](http://www.MilitaryOneSource.com).
- *Make plans for special occasions you'll miss.* Consider buying birthday and holiday gifts ahead of time and writing notes or cards for your spouse to give to your son or daughter on the special occasions. This will free you from having to mail your gift or card and worrying about whether it will arrive in time.
- *Contact your child's teachers and coaches.* Let them know you'll be deployed and ask them to keep you in the loop about grades, behavior, accomplishments, school plays, and any other information about your child's or teenager's school life. Give the teachers your e-mail address if you'll have Internet access. Studies show that schoolwork often suffers among children whose parents are deployed. Your

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active interest shows your child or teen that school is a priority for you. When your child knows that, he is more likely to make school a priority, too.

- *Learn about the area of the world where you'll be deployed.* Research this part of the world together. Find out what kinds of animals and plants are native to that region. Learn about its history, architecture, customs, and culture. Talk about the differences between that country and the United States. You can branch out into a discussion about the merits of democracy, but your primary purpose should be to spark your child's or teenager's interest in the region where you'll be so he'll feel more connected to you. When you're deployed, send your child photos, videos, and your observations of life in that part of the world.
- *Look at a calendar with your child.* Break out the calendar or appointment book you'll be bringing with you. Sit down together to flip through the months and jot down the important occasions. Use this as an opportunity to talk about your feelings and to let your child or teenager know without a doubt that you'll be thinking of her on the day of her school play, her birthday, and every other special event that comes up while you're deployed. Also, talk about ways you might share those moments. For example, you could ask your spouse to record the school play, or your teenager might decide to call you from the sidelines if her team makes the playoffs.
- *Read the same books.* Ask your child or teenager to give you a list of books he'll be reading for school or for pleasure while you're away. Get copies and read them yourself while you're on deployment. You'll feel part of your child's life by sharing the experience of reading the same book and it will be fun to discuss your opinions. You'll also be letting your child or teenager know that you consider reading to be a worthwhile activity.

### **Staying involved while you're deployed**

Because your duties will consume much of your time and energy, try to make a habit of staying in touch with your family while you're deployed. Otherwise it may fall to the bottom of your list. Frequent contact with your family can help you get through difficult times. And your transition back home will be easier on everyone if you have kept up with each other's lives.

- *Set a schedule to stay in touch.* As much as possible, keep the connection going between you and your child. Set a schedule of phone calls, e-mails, or letters, but make sure your child knows that there will be times when the Internet is down or you'll be too busy to be in touch, and that she shouldn't worry if she doesn't hear from you as scheduled. Your spouse can help reassure your child at those times.
- *Check your calendar frequently.* This will help jog your memory about important events coming up in your child's or teen's life and will give you things to ask about when you call or write. Or, if you use a service such as Google Calendar ([www.calendar.google.com](http://www.calendar.google.com)), you can receive e-mail reminders of those big dates.

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- *Keep up with the little things.* When you're in touch with your family, talk about everyday matters. Ask specific questions. For example, ask your teenager what he's studying in history and try to remember what you learned about the topic when you were in school. Find out the names of his teammates, whom he gets along with best, and why. Find out if the dog still sneaks onto the living room couch when everybody leaves the room. Hearing and talking about these ordinary events can be reassuring to both of you and will give you a good sense of what life is like at home.
- *Play online games.* There are so many to choose from: fantasy games, checkers, chess, word games. Ask your teenager or child what her favorite game is. If you have high-speed Internet access, an ongoing game will be fun for both of you and help bridge the distance between you.
- *Send text messages if you have cell phone coverage.* This is a good way to send quick notes to your child any time of day or night to let him know you're thinking of him. Text your encouragement before a big game or a reminder to study for an important test.
- *Send souvenirs.* Children of all ages love to receive gifts in the mail. You don't need to send anything elaborate. It could be an interesting pebble you found on the ground, a simple handmade bracelet, or anything else that reminds your child of you and the area where you're deployed.
- *Ask your child to send you keepsakes, too.* Ask for anything that will help you feel included in her activities, such as the program from the school recital or the rotation for the gymnastics meet in which she competed. Remind your spouse and child to send you photos, too, including photos of them going about their daily lives.
- *Send a narrated video or still photographs of where you are.* Give your child or teen a sense of your everyday life by recording a tour or a series of still shots of where you sleep, where you eat, and other areas.

#### **How your spouse can help**

Your spouse will play an important role in helping you and your child or teenager remain close while you're on deployment. Your spouse can:

- *Remind your child or teenager when you will be calling.* If you're on a schedule, you and your child will be disappointed if he's not there when you call.
- *Bring you into conversations.* Even a simple, "I wonder what Dad's doing right now" or "Dad will love to hear about what you did today" will keep you in your child's mind and remind her that you want to keep up with her life.
- *Remind your child or teenager not to burden you with things over which you have no control.* Although you want to stay involved with your child's or teenager's life, there are some things you're better off not knowing because they could distract

you from your mission. Ask your spouse to reinforce to your child the difference between news that will make you feel included and information that will just upset you. You'll be happy to hear that your teenager passed his learner's permit test; not happy to find out that he dented the fender backing out of a parking space. The same goes for pulling you into family arguments. If your teenager is angry with his mother about the punishment for denting the fender, he should find someone else to complain to, not you.

- *Encourage your child to go to you with questions, advice, or homework help.* Even though you're far, you can still provide your child or teenager with your wisdom, expertise, and knowledge.

## Resources

### Your military support services

Each service branch sponsors information and support programs for service members and their families. You can call or visit any installation Army Community Service Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Fleet and Family Support Center, or Airman and Family Readiness Center regardless of your branch affiliation.

If you aren't near an installation, National Guard Family Assistance Centers are available in every state. The Local Community Resource Finder on the National Guard Family Program site at [www.guardfamily.org](http://www.guardfamily.org) will identify your closest center.

### Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members (regardless of activation status) and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues, including issues related to parenting, deployment, and reintegration. Free face-to-face counseling sessions (and their equivalent by phone or online) are also available. Call 1-800-342-9647 or go to [www.MilitaryOneSource.com](http://www.MilitaryOneSource.com) to learn more.

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