How and When to Talk about Deployment

How: Your preschooler will not fully understand what it means to be deployed. That doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t talk about it. Choose a special word for deployment, a word that you don’t use for regular day-to-day work or weekend drills. Having a special word will help to identify this event as different than “the usual” and will also aid in the reintegration process when Mom or Dad puts the uniform back on to go to work or drills. Some terms that other military parents have used are: army work, marching, playing army, and deployment. Although your preschooler may not understand what this word means just yet, they will learn the association over time. When talking about the timing of deployment with your preschooler, use changing seasons, birthdays, holidays, or things that they already have experienced. For example, you could say thing like, “Mom will be going to play army when the snow melts” or, “Dad will be coming back right after your fourth birthday”.

When: Unless your child suffers from severe anxiety, it is good to start talking about deployment several months in advance. For preschoolers, almost more important than how you talk about deployment will be how you establish your new routines (see back section for more information on routines).

How Much Information Should I Share about Deployment?

Before you talk to your preschooler about deployment, talk as adults about what you will say. Each family is different, there are no right or wrong answers. We do know, however, that your children will do much better with the information if it is delivered by a calm and reassuring parent. If you can make connections between what the soldier does at home and what they will be doing during deployment, your preschooler will be able to make better sense of it. For example, you can say things like, “Daddy is going to help other mommies and daddies take good care of their children”.

Your Preschooler:

— Doesn’t yet have an understanding of time. Six months from now might be tomorrow or next week.
— Relies on routines to feel secure and confident.
— Will look at how adults are acting to gauge how to feel. Is this event scary, happy, sad?
— Will usually show how he or she is feeling through actions rather than words. A preschooler’s imaginary play can reveal a lot about what is happening inside.

Parent Tips:

— Fill a jar with jellybeans (one jellybean per day of deployment). Remove and eat one jellybean per day. Your child will see the passage of time as the jar becomes empty.
— Make a paper chain, one link per day of deployment. Remove a link each day. The chain will get shorter. Have your soldier write notes on the links and have your child write notes on the back to make it even more fun.

*As members of the 1st BCT learned in a prior deployment, deployments can be extended, so be sure to add extra jellybeans or links.
ANNOUNCEMENTS:

ADAPT is beginning recruitment for our newest project.

We want to talk to Minnesota National Guard and Reserve families who have been through deployment and have at least one child between the ages of 5-12 years of age.

Participants are reimbursed for their time and will be part of cutting-edge research on supportive parenting programs for military families.

Call adapt@umn.edu or 612-624-4830 for more information

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Your Deployment Routine

Start your deployment routine early. Do not wait until the soldier is heading out the door. Transition into your new routine gradually and steadily. If Mom will be doing the bedtime routine instead of Dad — Dad, gradually step out of that role. If Grandpa is going to be picking your child up at daycare, let him start to do it one day a week starting now. From your child’s perspective, if the soldier leaves for deployment and his or her routine looks and feels very similar to before the soldier left, your preschooler will feel safe and secure and will have a much easier time adjusting to the deployment.

We understand that it might be hard for the soldier to begin to step down from some of his or her time with your child, but gradual changes are going to create a much more successful transition for your preschooler.

Upcoming Topics Vol 2:
Preparing for deployment, continued...