How: Your baby or toddler will not understand what it means to be deployed. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't name it. Like with slightly-older children, 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 little one may not understand what this word means just yet, they will learn the association over time.

When: For babies and toddlers the most important part of preparing them for deployment will be how you establish your new routines (see back section for more information on routines). The earlier and the more gradually you can establish these new routines—the better your baby will adjust to the changes.

How Much Information Should I Share about Deployment?

There won’t be many questions that you'll need to answer while your baby is very young. But your toddler will start to have questions. Keep the answers very simple and concrete. Before you talk to your toddler about deployment, talk first as adults and figure out 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 do during deployment, your preschooler will be able to make better sense of it. For example, you can say things like, “Daddy is going to fix trucks like he does in our garage.”

Your Baby & Toddler:

— Is forming close attachments with his/her caregivers.
— Relies upon adults for physical and emotional care.
— Is learning about emotions from adults around him/her that will lay a foundation for future coping.
— Will become increasingly independent and want to do things for him or herself.
— Temper tantrums are common.

Parent Tips:

— "Transitional objects" like teddy bears or blankets can be used to represent mom or dad during deployment. Introduce the transitional object early on—so that your baby associates it with the deploying soldier.
— Photographs and scents (like perfume or cologne) can be attached to soft objects for the child to cuddle while mom or dad is deployed.
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 baby or toddler 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 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 baby and toddler.

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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