



# Helping children cope with a parent's absence from home

## Defence Community Organisation

### Time apart from families due to deployments, training or other Service requirements is an integral feature of Defence life.

**Young children in particular may need extra support when their parent or care giver is away from home.**

Defence Community Organisation provides a range of support programs and can help parents to understand how children may react and how they can support them during the member's absence.

When a loved one is absent on deployment, training exercise or for other Service reasons, it can be a challenging and emotional time for the family. Young children in particular may need extra reassurance and comfort during this time. Children can experience a range of emotions, such as increased clinginess, irritability or becoming withdrawn. With a few simple strategies you can help your children cope and make it a less stressful time, while also fostering your child's resilience.

#### SHARE AND LISTEN

One of the most important things you can do to help prepare young children for the member's absence is to talk with them about it and listen to them. Here are some tips.

**Talk with your child in a straight forward and age-appropriate manner:** You could tell your child that Daddy or Mummy needs to go away for work and that things at home will be different for a while. For example, *'Daddy/Mummy won't be back until after your birthday'*. This reinforces to children that the separation is not their fault.

**Use visual cues:** Young children may find it difficult to grasp the concept of a long absence

and visual demonstrations are often easier to understand. You could mark the days on a calendar, create a countdown lolly jar or use a map to show where the parent will be. These visual cues can be used to prompt daily discussions about what the absent parent might be doing and assist in maintaining connection. Be mindful that deployments can change and that the reunion date may vary.

#### MAINTAIN A ROUTINE

Where possible, try to keep normal daily routines. Children will feel more secure if bedtimes, mealtimes and other important rituals remain unchanged. This time will be busier than usual, so it can help to simplify the routine, like by online ordering groceries. It's also common for children to act out or test the parent or caregiver at home. It is helpful to maintain the usual methods of discipline, while being aware that young children may need help to adjust to the change.

There are things you can do to help children with routines.

**Create an illustrated poster of the family routine:** Making a poster and choosing daily tasks can help young children better



understand and follow the routine. Letting your child choose daily tasks can be fun, and can also help develop your child's independence and self-confidence.

**Schedule quality time:** Arrange a weekly activity to do with your children, like going to the park, making craft, or a movie night. This activity can break up the absence by having things to look forward to and can become a special time to connect and recharge.

### EXPRESSING FEELINGS

When a parent or loved one is away, this can bring a range of emotions for young children, such as sadness, worry, confusion, or even anger. Young children may not be able to verbally express how they are feeling and may express their emotions through behaviour, play, facial expressions and through their body such as tummy aches

There are some ways you can help your child express their emotions in a positive way.

**Encourage children to express their feelings:** Use 'understanding and supportive language', like *'I'm here for you'* or *'together, we can get through this'*. Sharing some of your own emotions, like *'I miss Mum'* can also help and role-model that it is okay to feel and express a range of emotions. It can be an opportunity for connection and teaching. Creating a 'worry box' is another good way for children to express feelings and seek help when they're worried or upset.

**Help your child find ways to feel better and cope:** Find activities to build a 'coping skills toolbox'. This could include favourite activities like bubbles, drawing, stress balls, books, or coping strategies like breathing skills, jumping on the trampoline or patting the family pet. Keeping a journal is another effective way for children to express how they are feeling, such as by writing, painting or drawing a picture. It is also a useful tool to document memories and to share with the parent who is away when they return.

### MAINTAIN CONNECTION

Although the deployed parent is away from home, it is important to maintain closeness.

**Talk about ways to keep in touch:** Children can find it comforting to know how they can keep in touch with their parent when they are away. Before the absence discuss what communication options will be available and decide how to keep in touch, whether by phone, emails, letters or video calls. Young children can also be impatient, so it can be helpful to record the parent's voice reading a book or singing, so it can be played anytime.

**Exchange comfort items:** It can be helpful to swap teddy bears, or create a 'Daddy or Mummy' bear for each child and one for the member to take away with them. They can talk and give cuddles to their bear and those cuddles 'will be sent to Mum/Dad'. Children also respond well to comfort via their senses, so spraying their bear with the member's usual perfume or cologne can bring comfort to little ones when its bedtime, or when they are missing them.

### SUPPORT OPTIONS

At any stage, if you begin to feel overwhelmed or unsure about you or your children's ability to cope, then there are a number of support service available.

**Kids Helpline** provides confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling for young people aged 5–25  
**1800 55 1800**

**Headspace** offers tailored and holistic mental health support to 12–25 year olds  
**1800 650 890**

**Raising Children Network** is an online parenting resource with reliable and trustworthy information  
[raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)

Defence Community Organisation offers a wide range of support services to ADF members and their families.

For more information on this factsheet and other Defence Community Organisation support services visit [www.defence.gov.au/dco](http://www.defence.gov.au/dco) or call the all-hours Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

