SPEAKING UP FOR NAVAL SERVICE FAMILIES

Naval Families
FEDERATION

The Experience of Parental Absence in Royal Navy and Royal Marines Families

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND ADULTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

www.nff.org.uk

CONTENTS

FOREWORDS

FOREWORD BY BARBARA BENSON

Training and Quality Officer, YoungMinds

The spotlight on children and young people's mental health shines brighter today than ever before. However, despite greater awareness, when young people and their families take the courageous step to reach out for help, it can be much too difficult to find. The NHS is currently only able to support around one in three young people with a diagnosable mental health problem, while parents and carers, teachers and others who work with children often find it difficult to know where to find advice and support.

Turning real-life experiences into positive change, YoungMinds is leading the fight for a future where all young minds are supported and empowered, whatever the challenges. We value highly working with organisations such as the Naval Families Federation who are dedicated to promoting good mental health, building resilience to overcome life's difficulties, and speaking up for those struggling with mental health issues.

This vital guidance supports families and young people to break down the barriers to finding support and to harness their own experiences to achieve vital change for future generations.

FOREWORD BY DR LARISSA CUNNINGHAM

Educational Psychologist, Portsmouth City Council and Co-founder of Pompey's Military Kids

Children with parents in the Armed Forces face challenges that may go beyond the experience of the majority of families and children living in the UK. The families of Service personnel are often highly mobile and can experience prolonged periods of separation which can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety. Service families must continually adapt to the presence and absence of a serving parent; reorganising and readjusting to changing roles and routines. Education and social networks may be disrupted and the parent left at home often has to operate as a 'single parent'.

For Royal Navy and Royal Marines families a significant challenge is the prolonged periods of separation – the highest across the Armed Forces. This is an aspect of Service life that is often masked by their 'can do' attitude and resilient approach. Naval Service families are independent and resourceful, with the majority embedded in civilian communities. As a result, they may live a long way from support from other Service families, and the challenges they face may not be well understood in schools and healthcare settings.

This resource has been created to provide parents with some useful information about parental absence and separation, and to offer some strategies for families to help them thrive. It is accessible and easy to read, offering a personal touch and a sprinkle of humour throughout. Whilst written for parents, this resource is also accessible and relevant for extended family members, schools, community settings and healthcare providers. It provides a real and honest flavour of one of the unique challenges faced by Naval Service families today and will enable those who read it to gain a better understanding of what parental absence is like for them.

INTRODUCTION

WHY HAVE WE PRODUCED THIS RESOURCE?

Being a parent and raising children is exciting and rewarding, but it can be tough at times for any family. The amount, patterns and types of parental absence faced by Naval Service families present additional challenges that are not routinely experienced by most civilian families.

Each of the single Services of the Armed Forces has what are known as 'harmony guidelines', which are designed to help to manage the competing demands on a Service person's life, and prevent excessive time spent away. Current harmony guidelines allow Naval Service people to spend 60% of their time deployed and 40% alongside in their base port during a three-year period. The maximum individual threshold for separated service is 660 days away from the Service person's normal place of work in the same three-year period. Since most Naval Service families live away from base ports, many do not see their serving person during the working week, even when they are not away on operational deployment. The Naval Service experiences more family separation than the Army or RAF. That is not to say that the other Services don't also experience separation and other challenges – they do. If you are from an Army or RAF family and are reading this document, we hope that it helps you too.

YOU ARE THE EXPERT ON YOUR OWN FAMILY.

There is a lot of general information available for parents and care-givers. We have given details of some of the material we think you might find helpful in the resource section at the back of this publication. However, in response to the feedback Royal Navy and Royal Marines families have given us about their experiences, we wanted to produce a dedicated Naval Service resource to address some of the specific circumstances and needs they have described to us.

IF YOU ARE GOING THROUGH CHALLENGES, WE WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

The purpose of this resource is to draw together some useful information about parental absence and separation, and provide some strategies to help families thrive. It is a starting place to think about some of the issues. It's written by a parent, for parents, based on feedback from parents.

We're not here to try to tell people what to do. We've seen and heard a lot but do not presume to know your individual circumstances and experiences. You are the expert on your own family. You are already doing a great job. At the Naval Families Federation, we talk with people every day who are doing amazingly and raising wonderful, thriving children. But if you are going through challenges, we want you to know that you are not alone.

We frequently hear from families who want people in their support network to have a better understanding of the challenges they face. These families don't want to make a fuss. They are just getting on with it, but sometimes they need those around them in their communities, extended families and school settings to have a better sense of what parental absence is like for them and their children. If you are one of these families, this resource is something you can pass on to others in your team. Because you do need a team.

The information here harnesses the experiences of families who have talked with us. You are welcome to contact us with your own thoughts, constructive ideas for improvement or suggestions for future resources.

You don't need to read it all – dip in and pull out what you find helpful. Feel free to leave the parts that don't speak to your experience or that you find unhelpful.

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL ABSENCE ON THE CHILDREN OF PEOPLE IN THE ARMED FORCES

This section considers a small selection of the research about military deployment and parental absence. If you are looking for more of the practical stuff, feel free to skip over this.

WHERE DOES THE NAVAL FAMILIES FEDERATION'S INFORMATION COME FROM?

The Naval Families Federation is working with a wide cross-section of partner organisations to establish a better understanding of how Service-related parental absence affects children's outcomes. These include researchers, universities, government departments, the Directorate Children and Young People (DCYP), the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance), and the Service Children in State Schools (SCISS) organisation.

We also talk directly with serving people and their family members about their experiences. Family members often contact us with specific issues or to seek advice and support. We welcome feedback about any aspect of being part of a Royal Navy or Royal Marines family.

RESEARCH ABOUT CHILDREN FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

Much of the existing research about the impact of parental deployment originates in the United States, and does not necessarily reflect the UK's cultural context or deployment patterns. There are some relevant UK studies, most of which are tri-Service and include proportionately more Army personnel than Naval Service people. None of the available UK studies consider the impact of maternal absence.

Length of deployment

A RAND Corporation study conducted in the US in 2009[1] found that children in military families face certain emotional challenges. In particular, having a parent deployed for a long period of time was the most important factor associated with whether military children would struggle in their personal lives. The longer the period of time a parent had been deployed over the previous three years, the greater the chance that a child reported difficulties related to deployment.

Perceptions of the impact of a military career on children

A 2014 study conducted by Rowe et al from King's College[2] examined perceptions of the impact of a military career on children. In this study of UK Service personnel, around half of the subjects perceived their military career to have a negative impact on their children. Experiencing symptoms of common mental health disorders, probable Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), not being in a relationship, being a Regular and being a Non Commissioned Officer, were associated with a more negative view of the impact of a military career on children. Subjects with two or more children perceived both positive and negative effects on military children. Deploying for 13 months or more in a 3-year period, rather than deployment itself, was associated with a perceived negative impact on military children.

What adolescents say

A further study from King's College in 2016[3] assessed what adolescents reported as the best and worst thing about having a father in the UK Armed Forces. A majority of respondents (61%) said that lack of contact with their father was the most negative aspect of having a father in the military. Reported positive aspects of their father's role included a sense of pride (25%) and financial benefits (25%). This study looked at serving fathers only.

Emotional and behavioural difficulties

A UK study about paternal deployment was published in the British Journal of Psychiatry in 2018[4]. This tri-Service study involved fathers who had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. It found that deployment itself was not associated with childhood emotional and behavioural difficulties, but that such difficulties were associated with paternal probable PTSD.

Kin and Country

The Children's Commissioner's report 'Kin and Country: Growing up as an Armed Forces Child', published in 2018, highlighted children's emotional responses to the deployment of their parents . Children reported changes in family dynamics and increased responsibility for siblings and household tasks. Primary school children described parental absence as causing sadness, worry and general unease. The physical absence of parents contributed most significantly to creating this distress. Missing special family events was considered important. Teenagers shared these feelings, and additionally experienced anxiety about the welfare of the absent parent. Children described problems they faced when their at-home parent was unwell or unable to care for themselves properly. Illness, pregnancy and younger siblings placed additional responsibility on children during deployments. The report highlights the resilience of Armed Forces children and their ability to utilise coping strategies. (N.B. It is likely that the children selected to take part in the study by their schools would have been those children who were more resilient and able to articulate their experiences, as the study involved interviews and travelling to London to represent their schools). The report makes a number of recommendations which include the provision of adequate emotional support, particularly for teenagers.

Children in Service families in schools

A report published by Ofsted in May 2011 examined the quality of educational provision and outcomes for children and young people who are in Service families[6]. It stated that Service children were generally susceptible to social and emotional disturbance while a parent or other family member was on active deployment. This was further heightened for some children with special educational needs or where parents were deployed in areas of military conflict. It recognised that the frequency and duration of operational deployments by a parent can have far-reaching consequences for Service families, including lengthy periods of separation and dislocation. In extreme cases, it could involve bereavement, or lead to a family having to accept and cope with physical or mental damage to a parent as a result of operational deployment. Schools also reported a number of social and emotional pressures that were created around single families and the readjustments needed when a partner returned from active service. Parents from Service families told inspectors they functioned as 'single parents' while the other parent was assigned elsewhere. Children said they were missing the male role model in their family. They worried about whether their serving parent would come back and were anxious when their parent went away.

61% SAID THAT LACK OF CONTACT WITH THEIR FATHER WAS THE MOST NEGATIVE ASPECT OF HAVING A FATHER IN THE MILITARY.

Weekending

A research project commissioned by Greenwich Hospital, with support from the Naval Families Federation, has been conducted by the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), King's College London. This research considers the influence of separations unrelated to operational deployments, including 'weekending' on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy and Royal Marines families. The study used data from pre-existing studies within KCMHR and collected new data from online surveys, interviews and focus groups.

It found that employment of partners, family roles and relationships, and the health and well-being of partners and children, could all be negatively influenced by separation, but alleviated by access to resources such as support from employers, social networks, childcare settings and schools.

A report from this study will be released in early 2019 which will summarise the findings and make recommendations for future research and potential interventions to support Armed Forces families experiencing this type of separation.

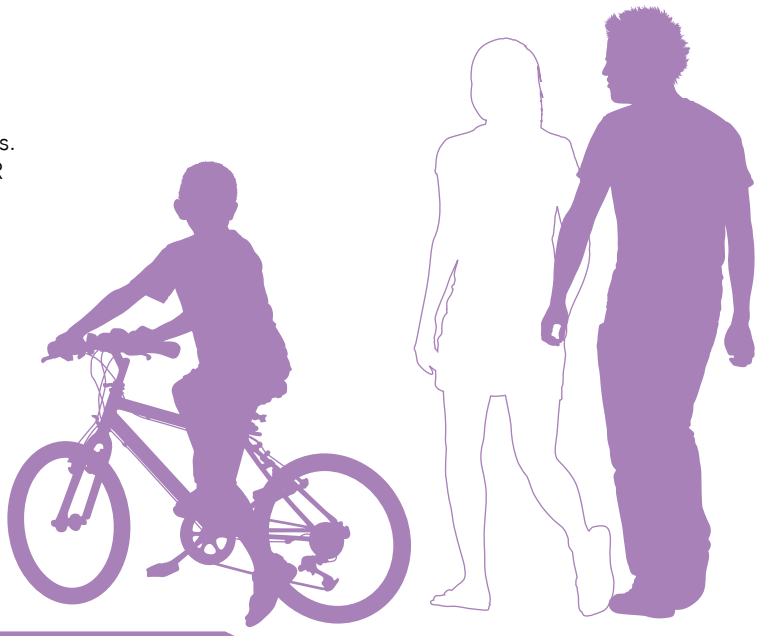
CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

One in eight 5 to 19 year olds in England had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017, according to NHS England's data published in November 2018[7]. Emotional disorders were the most prevalent type. These include anxiety and depressive disorders. The other broad categories were behavioural, hyperactivity and other less common disorders. Rates of mental disorders increased with age. Emotional disorders have become more common in 5 to 15 year olds since the last comparable research carried out in 2004. The figures include children from Armed Forces families. Children and young people were eligible if they were aged 2 to 19, they lived in England, and were registered with a GP. Separate data on the mental health of Armed Forces children are not yet collected and the NFF continues to press for action to address this.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR NAVAL SERVICE FAMILIES

We know that mental health difficulties are common among all children and young people, and that they are facing different challenges to previous generations, including increased pressures from social media and academic expectations. Naval Service children have additional challenges including parental absence and mobility. We know that for many children, with the right support, a certain amount of challenge brings new strengths and the ability to thrive, even in adversity. The research does not show that children are necessarily going to be negatively affected by Service-related parental absence. Parents also identified positive impacts on children, including a greater sense of responsibility, a wider perspective on the world, and the ability to adapt to challenges.

If we develop a greater awareness of the subject, and equip ourselves with the right tools, we can take action to mitigate the impact of parental absence. We hope that the contents of this resource will be a useful contribution.



THE PERFECT FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

IT'S A MYTH

At times, when Service life feels overwhelming, it can be tempting to think that problems would go away if only the serving person was doing a job in Civvy Street. When we see civilian families who are together all of the time, their lives may appear very simple and stable by comparison.

There is, however, no perfect universe in which parents are raising children and young people. Every family has its challenges, even if these do not seem readily apparent to someone looking in from the outside. The idea that there is a family out there raising children in an optimal environment is a fiction. We cannot control everything, or always prevent trouble from happening. There will always be challenges. As Service families, we do not need to compound the challenges we already face by beating ourselves up over our choice of lifestyle. There are positives as well as difficulties, and much can be done to mitigate the challenges for many families.

There is a proverb that says no family can hang out the sign 'Nothing the matter here.'

EVERYONE NEEDS SUPPORT SOMETIMES

There are times when all families need support of different kinds. This is not a sign of weakness or failure, but a reality that we need to accept. We do not have to get on stoically with things when we really need support. Families, both Service and civilian, will inevitably experience bumps in the road, no matter how capable or resourceful they may be. Our Naval Service lifestyle presents real challenges and can be tough. It is okay to seek out and accept appropriate help. It's good for our kids to see us do this.

THERE IS A PROVERB THAT SAYS ... NO FAMILY CAN HANG OUT THE SIGN 'NOTHING THE MATTER HERE.'

PERFECTION ISN'T POSSIBLE OR DESIRABLE

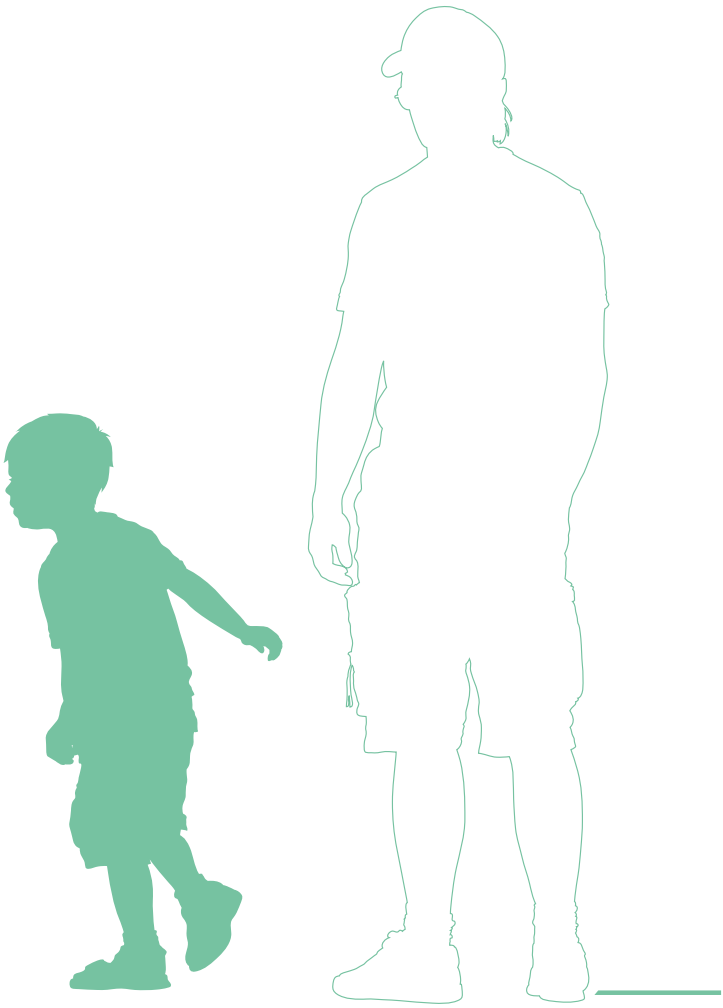
It is common for Naval Service people to have high standards, and this is also a characteristic of many of their spouses and partners. The desire to perform well in all aspects of life, at work and at home, is an understandable and generally positive thing. Parenting, however, is a messy business in which perfection, or even something approaching it, is not possible. This is because both parents and kids are imperfect, and that's okay!

AVOIDING THE BLAME GAME

When we are facing problems with our children or our relationships, it is common to tend to blame someone or something. It's a normal human reaction. Sometimes we blame ourselves; sometimes we are annoyed with our kids or with our partner. Sometimes we blame our partner's job, or our in-laws. Sometimes we do have a legitimate complaint, and it drives us to change things for the better. However, there does not always have to be fault when there are problems. Problems will always happen, even in the best of all possible circumstances.

'GOOD ENOUGH' PARENTS

Parenting only needs to be 'good enough'. When your children experience difficulties, this does not mean that you are a 'bad parent'. We can sometimes judge ourselves as parents very harshly, when in reality we are doing the best we can and we cannot always control the outcomes of events. We instinctively want to protect our children, but we cannot do more than our best. We can hope, but we cannot guarantee. Life always includes difficulties as well as good times. While we don't welcome the uncomfortable stuff, a certain amount of challenge, with the right support, helps our kids to grow and to become able to manage difficulties for themselves.



TYPES OF SEPARATION AND PARENTAL ABSENCE

There are different types of Service-related parental absence, which present their own particular challenges and opportunities, and we explore some of these in the next few pages.

To help to identify some of the feelings involved in times of separation, and as an illustration of how emotions may change as well, the Emotional Cycle of Deployment is a useful model to refer to. It was originally developed in the United States and based around planned deployments of three months or more. It therefore has some limitations in application to current United Kingdom Naval Service activity. We look at this in more detail both for adults and children later in this publication. We suggest that you read this regardless of what type of absence or separation you are experiencing. It can help to identify some of the feelings that may be involved, and gives a useful illustration of how emotions may change over a period of separation. In particular we hope that this will reassure you that your feelings are normal. However challenging things may be at this moment, things can and do change.

PLANNED DEPLOYMENT

This type of absence gives you the opportunity to prepare, both practically and emotionally, for the serving person's departure and eventual return. In some respects this can be helpful. Having a bit of control over planning how to deal with a situation can sometimes help you feel it's more manageable. You will nevertheless experience difficult feelings at various points in the deployment cycle which are normal and unavoidable. Often planned deployments are lengthy. Much will change at home during the course of a deployment, and you will all have to make adjustments when the serving person returns. There may be short-notice changes to programmes, with delays to departures or returns, which can be challenging and frustrating for everyone in the family.

If possible, find out ahead of time what kind of communication may exist between home and the deployed person. If the serving person knows that they won't have access to email, INtouch, phone or social media, get them to talk it through with you at home so that your expectations are realistic. While you are talking about communication, agree some ground rules about social media. For example, if you are a serving person, make sure your partner or child has had a message from you before they see you tagged in a photo in a bar on Facebook. It happens, and it can be hard to deal with at home.

When are you apart, you may find it hard to think about your loved ones and how they may be feeling. Emotionally distancing yourself can be a way of coping with separation. This is where it can help to have talked it through beforehand so that you have a plan for how you expect each other to behave. Here are a few examples of things you might want to talk about:

- What's best way for you to communicate – is it email, WhatsApp, INtouch, Familygram, snail mail, video chat or another method?
- What is the best way for the absent parent to communicate with their children and young people? Think about what is meaningful to their age and stage of development.
- What is the likelihood of there being times without communication? How will you deal with this?
- Submariners – does your loved one know how the Familygram works and about its limitations?
- What if the other person catches you at a bad moment and you can't talk or don't want to?
- What if your children don't want to talk or communicate with the person who is away?
- Is there a time of day that the deployed person should avoid making contact (eg the school run, bath times, working hours)?
- Does each family member understand what information they can and cannot share about the deployment on social media?
- Are you going to send and receive care packages? If yes, what would be meaningful and helpful to you and your children or young people? If no, that's okay too.
- Do you have any specific worries about the deployment that you need to discuss?
- Do your children or young people have any specific worries that they need to discuss?
- Is there anything the serving person can do before they leave or during the deployment to support their child or young person?
- Does your child or young person's school know that their parent is being deployed?
- Does the school understand how this may affect feelings and behaviour?
- How will the school communicate with the deployed parent?
- Does everyone know what do to in the event of a family emergency?
- Do you have the contact details you need?


H.M.S. PORTLAND

WEEKENDING

'Weekending' is a term often used to describe when a serving person works away from their home address during the week, and comes home at weekends. There are different perspectives on this, and these may vary according to the family's circumstances at any given time.

For some families, weekending makes the time spent together at weekends feel precious in a positive way. Work is set aside and families make a conscious effort to spend quality time together, doing things they enjoy. It may be easier for one person at the family home to just get on with it during the week without having to factor in another viewpoint or needs. Some people enjoy the independence, a bed to themselves, having sole control of the remote, or cooking for one person fewer.

On the other hand, it can involve a lot of pressure to make the most of the time at the weekend. You might put off issues that need discussing, as no one wants an argument, and there is limited opportunity to make up after a disagreement. You may feel that you are 'marking time' in your relationship as a couple. It can be tiring for the person who is at home taking charge of childcare, work, DIY and domestic chores. If you are a parent looking after a child at home, you may feel socially isolated because you cannot leave the house after your child's bedtime, and you may not have access to childcare. The 'weekending' partner may lose touch with the sheer amount of effort the other is putting in at home. When a serving person is coming home after a busy week of work, they may wish to relax, but their partner may need them to help with chores, or have other expectations. Weekending can take the spontaneity out of sex, and involve pressure to be physically intimate even when you may feel emotionally disconnected from your partner.

The disruption of weekending can be particularly challenging for families with children with certain special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). For example, children with an autism spectrum diagnosis have difficulty adjusting to changes in routines, and need a consistent approach that minimises disruption. Getting on the same page and working as a team are key. It can be incredibly hard to find time for couple relationships when you are parenting a child with special needs, and this is made even harder for couples who are weekending or experiencing other kinds of separation. Supporting children with SEND is a specialist area which is not addressed in detail in this resource. Sources of support are listed at the back.

SHORT-NOTICE DEPLOYMENTS AND ABSENCES

These can present an additional layer of challenge, as there is no time for you or your children to do the emotional and practical preparations that can give a sense of control over the situation. Short-notice departures can be a real shock to the system, and both children and adults may experience a sense of unreality and take time to adjust to the new situation. There can be a sense of loss akin to a sudden bereavement. Feelings may be magnified or feelings may be absent for a time. The early days can be physically and emotionally draining. Sticking to routines and maintaining the normal rhythms of life can help while everyone 'catches up' with the new situation. Short-notice changes are often linked to operational deployments, which can bring an additional layer of stress.

DEPLOYMENTS AND OPERATIONS INVOLVING SIGNIFICANT RISK

There are times when serving family members are involved in activities which we know or suspect will expose them to significant risk. There are practical aspects to preparing for such events, for example:

- ensuring that wills are up to date;
- checking that the family have contact details for the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC);
- making sure next of kin and emergency contact details are correct on the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system;
- signing up to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare forum via the Royal Navy website, so that information and updates on particular operations can be accessed.

These practical preparations are essential, but are also a reminder of what may be at stake. The feelings of anxiety and restlessness that exist before any planned deployment may be heightened. It can be difficult for the serving person to know how best to approach the subject of risk with their loved ones, whether to share their own worries or to try to protect their family members from them. Communication can become more difficult as a result.

It can be helpful for family members to keep in mind that the training and preparation that will have occurred beforehand has equipped their serving person for the task ahead. They will usually be part of a well-practised and cohesive team who will look after one another.

During such deployments and operations communication is often eagerly anticipated. The reassurance of a call or email can make a lot of difference at home. A lack of contact may cause real worry that something bad has happened, when the reality is usually that contact is difficult because of the nature of the operation. It can be frustrating at home when a call finally comes through just as you are leaving for the school

run or about to go into a meeting. Online communications can be challenging because it is hard to read the emotional temperature and there is always a risk of misunderstanding. If you can, it is good to give the other person the benefit of the doubt if their tone doesn't seem quite right. Any issues or disagreements you may be having are realistically unlikely to be resolved at long distance and in such challenging circumstances.

It is quite likely that the serving person's focus will switch from the family at home to the team in their operational environment. This is not a reflection of their feelings about their family but rather is a coping strategy which builds relationships and establishes a bond that will help to keep them safe.

During high-profile operations which are likely to attract news coverage, the family at home may wish to consider limiting the amount of time spent focussed on following developments in the news. Get an update, and then move on to a distracting activity. If there is news that affects you, you will get to hear it. Try to avoid immersing yourself or your children in a constant stream of news, as this can feed anxiety. Be aware that older children and teens may access news via smartphones and other devices, and put a plan in place for this. Ideally, keep bedrooms mobile-free at night. Social media use can have benefits for young people seeking support from peers in the same situation, but you need to ensure that this is managed in a way that keeps it positive.

NO-CONTACT DEPLOYMENTS/ OPERATIONS

When you have limited contact with a serving person, or when they cannot share with you details of where and why they are going away, it can be a tricky situation to handle. With little information to hold onto, there is more scope for the imagination to take flight, and family members can find themselves speculating about all sorts of situations which may bear little resemblance to what is actually happening for the serving person. When we dwell on worst-case scenarios, anxiety and fear tend to set in.

Parents holding the fort at home will find that they shoulder the burden for much of the family decision-making, both big and small. This is when it can help to have other trusted adults in your network to share some of the load and to provide reassurance and support. This may be through friends and wider family, or through social media and internet groups of people who have had similar experiences.

'No contact' is challenging stuff, particularly when we are used to being very connected. It can be helpful to try to focus on what is known, rather than on all of the unknown stuff. What we know in this situation is what is happening for us and our children. This is where our focus needs to be – on taking care of ourselves and our young people. Paying attention to what is happening in the present moment can help your mental well-being. Some people find that practising mindfulness can help. You can find out more about this through the resources listed at the back of this document.

It may help to continue to write to your partner or to keep a journal of your thoughts. You don't have to share them if you don't want to. Children and young people might wish to keep a diary or save items such as tickets, pictures or mementos in a memory box. These can be helpful to kick-start sharing conversations when the serving person returns.

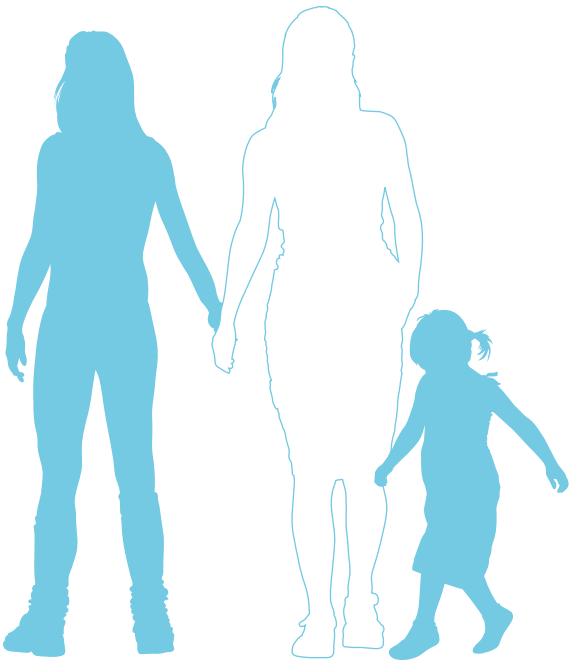
TRAINING AND EXERCISES

Serving people may be away from home for weeks or months at a time to undertake training courses and exercises. Sometimes these are shore-based courses, and sometimes they involve going to sea or overseas. There may be opportunities for contact with home, depending on the nature of the training. Some types of training, for example Operational Sea Training (OST), are particularly intensive and can seem a bit like an operational deployment from the family perspective. The serving person may be very preoccupied with their work during these activities, which can be difficult to handle at home. Training activities which simulate real-life operational situations require a very task-orientated mind-set, and it can be difficult to toggle quickly between this and the home environment.

CHILDREN ATTENDING BOARDING SCHOOL

A small proportion of Naval Service children attend boarding schools under the provision of the Continuity of Education Allowance. This allowance is offered by the Ministry of Defence in order to help Service families to achieve continuity of education for their children that would otherwise not be possible due to family mobility resulting from assignments. Children at boarding schools experience extended periods of separation from their parents during school term times. This may be overlaid with parental absence due to operational deployment, further increasing the potential for anxiety. The child's particular circumstances, and any worries they may have about a deployed parent, may not be immediately obvious to teaching or boarding staff if they have not been informed or if they do not have an insight into Service life.

Placing a child in boarding school is not a choice to be made lightly. Not every child is suited to boarding, and the school needs to be the right 'fit' for the family. It is important that children are given the opportunity to attend a 'taster' session before any firm decisions are made.



As the parent of a boarding child or young person, you need to make a strong home-school agreement, which makes provision for regular communication with staff who know them well. The school may have a designated person for pastoral care, but children and young people will typically choose to talk to whoever they trust. Make it your business to find out who this is, as well as familiarising yourself with other key figures such as tutors, heads of year groups, and the school nurse if there is one. Check out the school's well-being and anti-bullying policies. Try as much as possible to keep the channels of communication open, and check in regularly with how your child is feeling. This can be hard, especially if you are feeling anxious about them or finding the separation difficult yourself. Get support for yourself, so that your child or young person is able to turn to you if they need help.

Parents who opt to place their children in boarding school because of their Service lifestyle are sometimes subjected to judgement about their choice, even though this may be the best option for their child in their particular circumstances. This can be isolating, and the experience of separation may be especially tough on civilian parents who are moving to accompany a serving person on an assignment. There is an active online social media peer support group for parents in this situation. Contact the NFF if you need more details.

NON-BRITISH AND FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH FAMILIES

Non-British and Foreign and Commonwealth citizens and their families are subject to immigration control. Those who join the Royal Navy and Royal Marines are given 'exempt' immigration status while they are serving, allowing them to enter and live in the UK, and to travel freely. This status remains valid while they are serving or until they gain naturalisation.

These serving people are eligible to apply to bring a partner and dependent children to the UK. The rules are complex and there is a financial requirement. There has to be proof that the family meets the minimum income required by the Home Office to apply for entry to the UK. The financial requirement increases with the number of people in the family wishing to move to the UK. One consequence of this is that families may not be able to move the whole family as a unit. It is not uncommon for siblings to be separated from either parents or other siblings, with wider family in the country of origin acting in a parenting role.

Non-British families may also move to the UK for a serving member to take up a specific role with British Armed Forces or as part of an exchange programme.

Children moving to the UK from other countries experience significant changes. There may be differences in language, culture, religious practice, clothing, housing, climate and food, all of which require adjustment. Children may also experience discrimination or hostility. We can help children build a sense of belonging and a positive view of their circumstances (see the 'Resilience Framework' on the 'Boingboing' website listed in the 'recommended sources of support and information' section at the back of the publication).

DIFFICULT FEELINGS ARE NORMAL!

THEY DON'T MEAN THAT YOU ARE A BAD PARENT OR PARTNER. ALMOST ALL FAMILIES AND COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS EXPERIENCE CHALLENGES RELATED TO SEPARATION AND PARENTAL ABSENCE.

FEELINGS ABOUT SEPARATION AND PARENTAL ABSENCE

Difficult feelings are normal! They don't mean that you are a bad parent or partner. Almost all families and couple relationships experience challenges related to separation and parental absence. Feelings can be useful to help inform what you choose to do next. Squashing them down and pretending they don't exist isn't a great long-term strategy either. You can find some further reading about how to take care of yourself and your feelings in the resource list at the back of this document.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DIGITAL WORLD

We have touched on social media as a form of communication in the section on Planned Deployment. Our digital connections can be an important source of support to both adults and young people, and can enhance our lives in many different ways. At the same time, the absence of a parent brings additional demands for the at-home parent, particularly when it comes to giving undivided parental attention. It is very easy for tech to displace this. You may need to ring-fence certain times of day (e.g. the school pick-up, mealtimes, and bedtimes) to create opportunities for you to interact regularly with your child or young person. Go for a walk or do an activity together. Keep the channels of face-to-face communication open.

There are sources of information about online safety and helping children to navigate the online world at the back of this document. Whether you already feel confident in this area or not, take some time to think about it and to ask yourself if there are any concerns you need to address. Get some help if you need it.

YOUNG CARERS

WHO IS A YOUNG CARER?

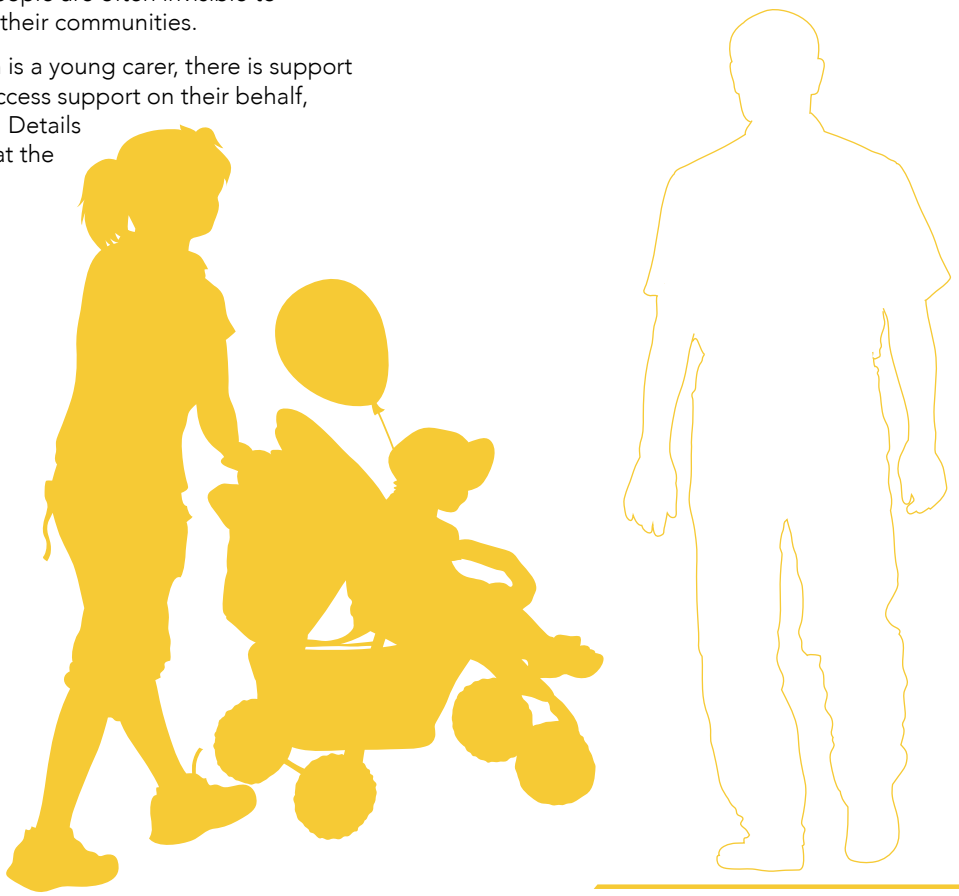
A young carer is a child or young person under the age of 18 who helps to look after another person who is physically or mentally ill, is disabled, or misuses substances. Typically young carers have additional responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of siblings, shopping, providing personal care and giving emotional support. While a certain amount of adult responsibility can be beneficial for children, for young carers the level of responsibility may make it difficult for them to participate fully at school and in their friendships with other children.

WHY DO YOUNG CARERS NEED TO BE IDENTIFIED AND OFFERED SUPPORT?

Young carers from Royal Navy and Royal Marines families may face additional challenges. When a serving parent is absent, they take on more responsibility for siblings and household tasks. They may need to give emotional support to other family members, for example to an at-home parent who is struggling with their partner's absence. They may miss out on opportunities that they would normally have, and have less relief from their duties. They can become isolated and are often afraid to ask for help. This may be because they feel a sense of loyalty to the family and worry about what might happen if they let someone outside know they are struggling. It may also be because they don't know that help is available, or because their situation seems 'normal' to them.

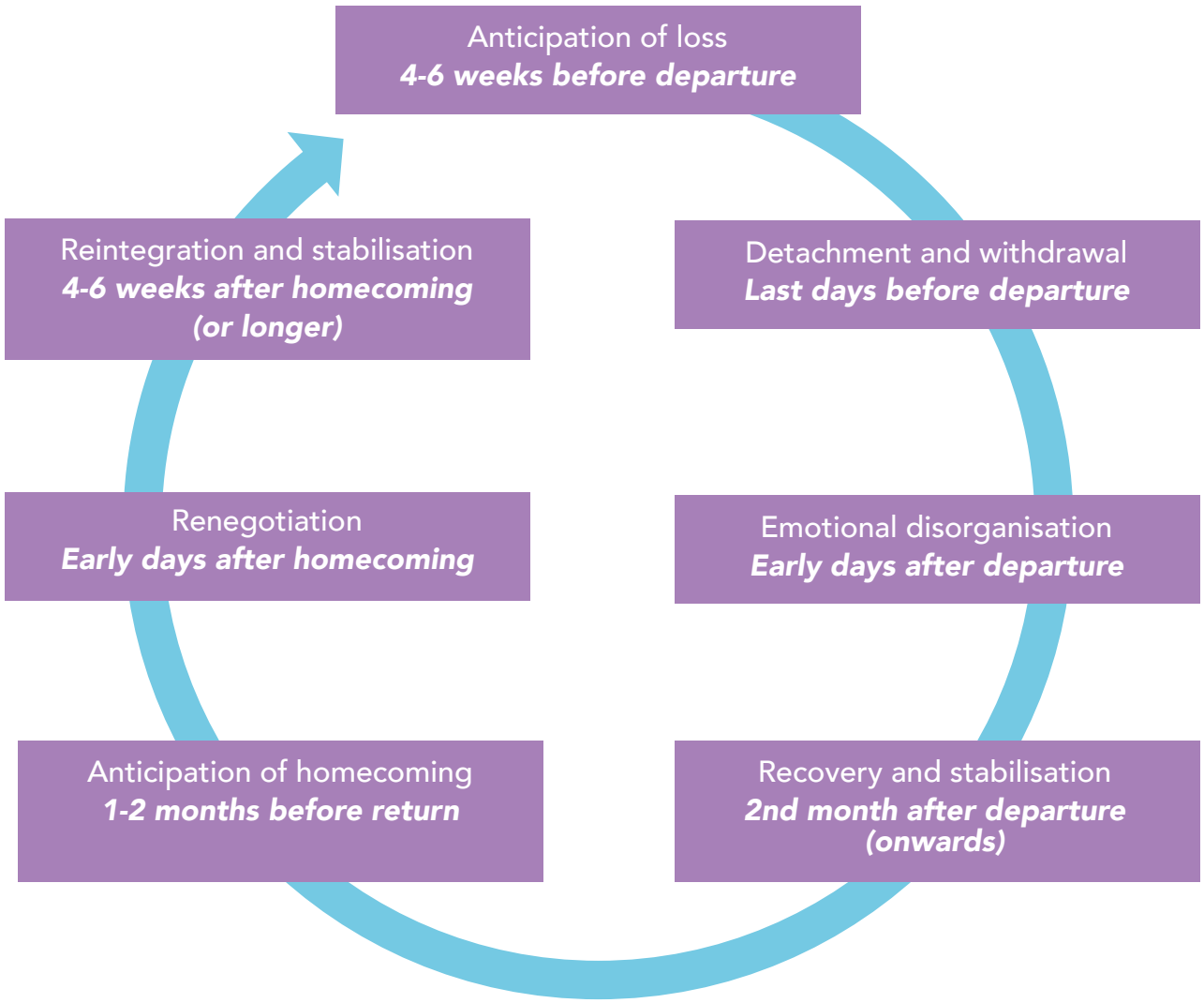
These children and young people are often invisible to schools and other people in their communities.

If your child or young person is a young carer, there is support available to them. You can access support on their behalf, or they can refer themselves. Details are in the resources section at the back of this booklet.



THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment is a model that was developed for naval families by Kathleen Vestal Logan in 1987 and published in Proceedings Magazine[8]. While times have moved on and operating patterns have changed, it is still a helpful tool in understanding and explaining changes in feelings and behaviour resulting from deployment. There will be individual differences in how people feel, and each deployment will be different.



THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT – WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ADULT RELATIONSHIPS?

Opposite is a summary of the feelings and behaviours, that are common for adults during different stages of the deployment cycle. You might want to show this to your partner, to others in your support network, or to someone you know who is experiencing these changes. It is helpful if you can recognise and understand your own feelings as an adult. You can bring this knowledge to your parenting role. Children and young people learn a lot from seeing how you approach challenges. You can help them to understand their own feelings and work out how you can support each other.

Feelings and behaviours for adults during the stages of the deployment cycle

Stage	Name	When does it happen?	How you and/or your loved ones may be feeling	Common behaviours
1	**Anticipation of loss**	4-6 weeks before deployment.	• Increased tension. • Pressure to get stuff done/time slipping away. • Worry. • Unexpressed anger. • Restlessness. • Irritability. • Guilt (person who is leaving). • Resentment (person who is staying).	• Being busy. • Cramming in projects. • Increased arguments. • Bickering. • Organising family visits and social events. • Unexpected tears over small things. • Thinking about ways to help children manage the separation.
2	**Detachment and withdrawal**	Final days before departure.	• Sadness. • Fatigue. • Emotional detachment. • Withdrawal. • Ambivalence about sexual intimacy (feeling like you should, but also wanting to keep at a distance). • Guilt. • Impatience to 'get on with it'. • Frustration (particularly if departure is delayed).	• Partners may stop sharing thoughts and feelings with each other. • Difficulties in communicating. • Focusing on individual tasks. • Having sex because it's your last chance or avoiding sex altogether.
3	**Emotional disorganisation**	Early days after departure.	• Shock. • Relief (may be followed with guilt at feeling relieved). • Numbness. • Pain. • Loneliness. • Sense of disruption. • Confusion. • Sense of being overwhelmed.	• Difficulty sleeping (responsible for 'security') or excessive sleeping. • Withdrawal from friends and neighbours. • Self-medicating with alcohol or food. • Doing tasks outside your comfort zone that your partner would normally do.
4	**Recovery and stabilisation**	Second month after departure onwards.	• Increased confidence and independence. • Isolation can still cause sense of vulnerability. • Pride in ability to manage alone. • Feeling a bit asexual – missing physical intimacy.	• Settling into a routine. • Establishment of new family patterns. • Being more outwardly independent. • Cultivating new friends and sources of support. • Stretching self and abilities. • Finding new skills.

Feelings and behaviours for adults during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

Stage	Name	When does it happen?	How you and/or your loved ones may be feeling	Common behaviours
5	**Anticipation of homecoming**	One to two months before return.	• Joy and excitement. • Apprehension. • Nervousness. • Worries about effect that return will have. • Worries about how you will feel about each other. • Worries about what the other partner will think about decisions and actions that have been taken. • Sense of running out of time to get the 'deployment list' completed.	• Questioning and re-evaluating the relationship. • Preparing by doing household jobs and personal care. • Preparations for the homecoming. • Big decisions may be postponed until the homecoming.
6	**Renegotiation of the relationship contract**	Early days after homecoming.	• Adjustment from being 'single' to behaving like partners. • Sense of a loss of freedom and independence – having to be answerable to another person. • Resentment. • At-home partner feeling out of control. • At-home partner feeling protective of children. • Returning partner feeling out of place in their own home. • Sex may initially seem weird – there can be a sense of 'entitlement' not matched by feelings of intimacy. • Can be both joyful and difficult.	• Adjusting priorities and loyalties in relationships – from 'oppos' on board/friends/support network to partner/spouse. • Changes to family routines and activities. • Too much togetherness causing friction. • Roles and responsibilities being renegotiated and changing. • Clash of parenting styles, renegotiation of joint approaches. • Talking about issues as they come up, having the first 'Big Argument'.
7	**Reintegration and stabilisation**	4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment/ separation).	• Beginning of sense of being back together as a family. • Enjoying more warmth and closeness. • Sense of normality. • Being more relaxed and comfortable with each other. • Back on track emotionally.	• New routines being established. • Partners talking about 'we', 'us' and 'our' instead of 'I', 'me' and 'my'. • Planning ahead. • Returning to a more balanced social life including extended family, mutual friends and individual activities.

It is important to say that deployment is not always necessarily a negative experience for couple relationships. There can be complex feelings involved, but feelings themselves are neither good nor bad, they just are. It is okay to feel whatever you feel; it doesn't mean that your relationship is doomed or that you or your partner have done something wrong. There is nothing inherently bad about feeling angry, for example. It is what we do with our anger that can be positive or negative.

The unique nature of Service life can drive some couples to be more consciously aware of their feelings and reactions, and to put greater emphasis on cultivating and nurturing their relationships. Knowing that what you are experiencing is normal and natural can be reassuring and help you to accept and work through challenges. Not every conflict is a sign of a deteriorating relationship; some conflict is inevitable and healthy. Having to negotiate challenges and change can strengthen and enhance the bond between partners.

Here are some things that adults have said to us about their experience of deployment:

"My husband deploys on Tuesday and I wish he'd just go already. It helps to know that it's normal and that other people feel the same way – that it's nothing to do with our relationship."

"I kept picking fights with my partner before he left, and then I felt guilty afterwards. Next time we will try to talk about it and recognise what it is about."

"I wonder if she will still like me when I come back. I know it is crazy but you do think about it."

"I find it helps to make plans for things to do when they are away. They don't have to be big things but it helps to break up the time if I know I will be seeing a friend one weekend."

"I try to eat healthily and look after myself while he's gone."

"Is it bad that I like not having to cook big meals and having the bed to myself? And we don't have to watch 'Dave'!"

"When he gets back it's all lovely at first and then having his stuff everywhere gets on my nerves. I usually bite my tongue for the first couple of weeks and then we have a row. After that things get back to normal!"

"I miss him when he's gone and he drives me nuts when he's at home – he gets under my feet. I guess most married couples get on each other's nerves though."

"When he comes home he doesn't help around the house enough because I do everything. We have to sort out who does what jobs because otherwise I am always tired and grumpy."

"I think we manage pretty well when he's away. I'm quite proud of myself actually."

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT – WHAT IS HAPPENING FOR CHILDREN?

Having considered adult responses to the different stages of deployment, let us turn to how a child may experience a parent's deployment.

How children respond to parental absence through deployment, and to their parent's return home, will depend very much on their age and stage of development. Not all children will experience deployment in the same way, and some children move through the process relatively smoothly. Children can be very surprising and resourceful, and may take things in their stride. Nevertheless they are likely to be dealing with some complicated and strong feelings, and will need help to navigate these. A good first step would be to share this information with your child's school or other care-givers.

We have considered the deployment cycle roughly by age and stage of development in this section. Not all children fit neatly into these 'boxes.' For convenience we have lumped together some of the stages of development in the pages that follow as this resource was in danger of becoming a book! Obviously there is a huge range of development between a new-born baby and a pre-schooler, but the idea is to help you to think in general terms about the fact that children's experiences change along with their cognitive development.

If you have any concerns about your child's feelings or behaviour, do speak with your Health Visitor, GP, child's teacher, or other appropriate professional. You may need to provide them with some background to your situation to help them to understand the context if they have had little contact with the Armed Forces.

Many of the ideas and strategies here come from parents who have been through deployments themselves. This guide is a starting point and you may have other strategies that work for you. All children, young people and families are different. Do get in touch with us and let us know your ideas – we always love to hear from you.

BABIES, TODDLERS AND PRE-SCHOOLERS: CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS AGE AND STAGE

- Babies live in the moment and respond instinctively. They have little sense of time.
- They need to have a close bond with at least one main care-giver. They can connect in loving ways with more than one familiar care-giver.
- Evidence shows that the close bond with a main care-giver shapes a child's brain development, and influences outcomes later in life.
- From 4-7 months babies develop 'object permanence' – the concept that something a baby cannot see does still exist. This is the basis of 'peekaboo' games.
  - Object permanence is the reason why babies start to exhibit separation anxiety when a parent leaves a room – they know that you can come back again.
  - This is also linked to stranger anxiety – babies are able to recognise different people.
- Younger babies do not recognise themselves as separate beings. Self-recognition arrives at around 15 months. This is also when toddlers begin to exercise their independence and tantrums occur.

Feelings and behaviours for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers during the stages of the deployment cycle

1. Anticipation of Loss – 4-6 weeks before deployment

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
May not understand what is going on but may sense increased tension.	• Babies and toddlers are unlikely to be aware of imminent changes. • Pre-schoolers are likely to carry on as usual as they cannot anticipate the changes. • Changes in behaviour in all babies and early years children are likely to result from them picking up on your feelings of anticipation of something significant being about to happen. • Babies and small children may become more fussy, clingy or irritable in response to any changes in your feelings at this stage.	• This is a good time to give your baby or toddler the opportunity to become familiar with other trusted care-givers, so that they feel secure with more than one adult. • For older toddlers and pre-schoolers, where possible, visit the ship, or show pictures of where the parent will sleep. • Serving parents might want to record a bedtime story, or choose some special picture books to be shared when they are away. They can prepare some surprises or treats (eg a treasure hunt, a special DVD to watch on a rainy day, a 'busy box' or 'quiet bin' of things to keep a toddler occupied when their care-giver needs a break). • Think now about how you want to approach co-sleeping if the at-home parent thinks they wish to have a child sharing their bed while the serving parent is away. If this isn't what your family normally do, and the child will be immediately ejected into his/her own bed when the serving person returns, consider other solutions to night-time waking.

2. Detachment and Withdrawal – last days before departure

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
May not understand what is going on but may sense increased tension.	• Many carry on as usual. • May express their feelings through increased tantrums, be clingy, or show swings between moods of great dependence and independence. • Sleep or eating may be disturbed (although of course this is common anyway). Toddlers and pre-schoolers tend to live in the moment and respond to what is happening around them now – they may have difficulty comprehending that a parent is leaving while they are still there.	• Let nursery and other care-givers know about the deployment. • Keep to your usual family routines right up to the day of departure. • Let children help the serving person pack if they want to. • Help them to pack a photo of themselves somewhere safe. • Make plans for how you will stay in contact. • Plan for what will happen during special occasions while the serving person is away – write in birthday cards or choose gifts. • Spend time with each child individually. • Exchange 'comfort items', e.g. a soft toy, personal memento, or item the child has made. • Keep goodbyes short.

3. Emotional Disorganisation – early days after departure

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
Younger babies will have little awareness of what has happened, provided they have access to their usual care-giver. Toddlers and pre-schoolers may be confused, as they have a limited ability to understand what has happened.	• Babies may become more fussy, clingy or irritable in response to any changes in your feelings at this stage. • Toddler behaviour can be erratic at the best of times, so it can be difficult to work out what the cause may be. You may see behaviours such as: clinging to people or favourite toy or blanket; unexplained crying or tearfulness; hitting, biting people or things; shrinking away from people or becoming very quiet; sleep difficulties or disturbances (waking, bad dreams); eating difficulties or change in eating patterns; fear of new people or situations. • Toddlers may look for the absent parent. • Pre-schoolers may regress to behaviours that had finished, e.g. toilet training may regress.	• Take proper care of yourself and try to maintain healthy habits like eating a balanced diet and getting some exercise. • Try to stick to normal routines – for example regular meal and bedtimes. • Remain consistent with your household rules; this helps children to feel secure. • Give extra support and attention. Continue to talk about the absent parent and show pictures. Although this may be painful, it will help the subsequent reunion to remember the person who is absent. • Set up a visual countdown calendar. • Put words to their feelings – 'I can see you are feeling very angry/sad/frustrated'.

4. Recovery and Stabilisation – 2nd month after departure onwards

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Things start to feel normal and settle into a routine. • Increased confidence. • More settled, sunnier temperament.	• Regressive behaviours settling down. • Routines getting established. • Improvements in sleep patterns, but not always. • Reduction in tantrums, but again not always – tantrums are a normal part of development.	• Keep a scrapbook or memory box of things you are doing, so that you and your child have a record to share with the returning parent. This can help you all to re-connect. • Take help when it is offered. This is a marathon and not a sprint. There are no prizes for stoically going it alone. • Provide predictable separation reunion routines for drop-offs and pick-ups – be there when you say you will. • Seek support from your health visitor or GP if you have any concerns about your child or about your own well-being.

5. Anticipation of Homecoming – 1 to 2 months before return

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
Toddlers may have difficulty remembering what it was like to be around their serving parent.	• May not really understand what is happening until the homecoming is imminent. • Behaviour may become more erratic as they sense impending changes.	• Send pictures from the children to the absent parent. Update them on new skills acquired and things that have changed. • If not discussed prior to deployment, agree between the primary care-giver and returning parent how you will navigate the homecoming with regard to extended family members. Where possible, the homecoming person should take charge of managing expectations on his/her side of the family. It may be necessary to explain the need for the immediate family unit to have time and space to reintegrate before having extended visits.

Feelings and behaviours for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

6. Renegotiation – early days after homecoming

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Picking up on parental feelings of well-being or tension. • Beginning of sense of being back together as a family. • Enjoying more warmth, closeness and cuddles.	• Tendency to default to the primary care-giver for cuddles and reassurance. • Initial wariness or even rejection of returning parent.	• Returning parent: take your cues from the person who has been the primary care-giver to begin with. • Allow time for emotional reconnection – if children are a little wary to begin with, this can be upsetting but it will resolve. Spend time with each child individually. Watch them play and give positive attention and praise. Describe what you see them doing (a bit like a commentator). Share their scrapbook or memory box of what has happened during the deployment. • Build up trust and closeness again by easing in gradually to changes in routines with younger children.

7. Reintegration and Stabilisation – 4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment)

How babies and early years children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Sense of normality. • Learning to be more relaxed and comfortable with returned parent.	• More equal expectations of both care-givers.	• For couples – invest in your own relationship and communication as this is one of the most helpful things you can do for your family. You can access support through Relate for all aspects of couple and family relationships. • Continue to spend one-to-one time with each child doing something they enjoy.

PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN: CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS AGE AND STAGE

- Dip in and out of strong feelings.
- Have a sense of the past and future.
- Younger children have 'magical thinking' – they wish things and have strong imaginations.
- Fears seem very real. Common fears are things such as darkness, being hurt, a parent not being there.
- Self-centred and are just developing a sense of their impact on others. Learning empathy but this takes time.
- May have ideas about cause and effect – did the person leave because of something they did?
- Developing a better understanding of what is happening.
- Memories of the absent parent are more permanent – children can understand they are elsewhere.
- Somatisation – feelings and anxieties are expressed in physical ways e.g. tummy aches.
- Feelings of protection for parents – not wanting to upset them.

Feelings and behaviours for primary school-aged children during the stages of the deployment cycle

1. Anticipation of Loss – 4-6 weeks before deployment

How children may be feeling:

- Shocked (if they have just found out), in denial, worried, sad.
- Angry (sometimes unexpressed), restless, resentful.
- Confused.
- Children may dip in and out of negative feelings and forget all about the impending changes for periods of time.
- Some children who have had positive experiences of deployment before may take the news in their stride.
- A child's response may depend on the type of deployment and the perceived level of risk to the serving person.

Common behaviours:

- Children may find it difficult to talk about their feelings because they are not quite sure about their own emotions – it is a confusing time.
- Testing rules and boundaries, outbursts of anger, low-level 'whingeing', clinginess, regression to behaviours they had outgrown.

Strategies and practical ideas that may help:

- Listen to your child, make opportunities for them to talk and ask questions.
- Answer concerns honestly and in an age-appropriate way.
- Try not to overburden them with your feelings but be clear that the serving person would like to stay with them and will miss them.
- Talk about how well prepared the serving person is, how their team trains and works together to keep each other safe.
- Offer reassurance that their feelings are normal. Be calm.
- Explain that the serving person is going and that they are coming back.
- Talk about where the serving person is going and what they will do. Find out information about it together.
- Where possible, visit the ship, or show pictures of where the parent will sleep.
- Record a Storybook Waves story. Get the 'When a special person goes away workbook' from RNRM Welfare. Some families create a 'deployment wall' with a map, photos and special information about the serving person. You can later connect the serving person's location (if known) with the location of the child with a string.

2. Detachment and Withdrawal – last days before departure

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Sad. • Worried. • Anxious. • Emotionally detached. • Withdrawn. • Guilty. • Irritable. • Bereft and empty. • Angry. • Proud. • Excited. • Responsible for the serving person leaving – may feel somehow at fault as the situation is. hard to understand. • Impatience to 'get it over with'. • Frustration (particularly if departure is delayed).	• Tearful and sensitive. • Angry outbursts, sometimes followed by sad or clingy behaviour. • Wanting attention and physical contact. • Feeling protective of the remaining parent and young siblings.	• Let school and other care-givers know about the deployment. • Stick to your usual family routines right up to the day of departure. Consider organising something special, like a family party or outing to look back on. • Let children help the serving person pack if they want to. Help them to pack a photo of themselves somewhere safe. • Make plans for how you will stay in contact. • Plan for what will happen during special occasions while the serving person is away – write in birthday cards or choose gifts. • Spend time with each child individually. • Exchange 'comfort items', for instance a soft toy or a personal memento, an item the child has made. • Share memories with your children about ways they have coped with other difficult situations in the past. • Acknowledge and name feelings (yours as well as theirs) honestly and openly. • Avoid placing inappropriate responsibility on children by telling them that they are 'the woman/man of the house' while the serving person is away. Don't tell children to 'look after mum/dad'. • Keep goodbyes short.

3. Emotional Disorganisation – early days after departure

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Shocked. • Relieved (may be followed by guilt at feeling relieved). • Numb. • Pained. • Lonely. • Anxious. • Sense of anti-climax. • Sense of disruption. • Bereft or empty. • Confused. • Sense of being overwhelmed.	• Any of the signs listed above, and: • A rise in complaints about stomach aches, headaches, or other illnesses. • More sensitive than usual. • Problems about school (does not want to go, not paying attention, general complaining). • Anger towards at-home parent. • Testing the limits to see if the rules are the same. • Withdrawal from family and friends. • Bedwetting. • Sleep disruption.	• Take proper care of yourself and try to maintain healthy habits like eating a balanced diet and getting some exercise. • Try to stick to normal routines – for example regular meal and bedtimes. • Remain consistent with your household rules; this helps children to feel secure. • Give extra support and attention. • Talk openly and honestly about separation and what they miss. Although this may be painful, it will help the subsequent reunion to remember the person who is absent. • Set up a visual countdown calendar. • Talk with school and other care-givers about what is happening. • Find a trusted adult at school that your child can talk to.

Feelings and behaviours for primary school-aged children during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

3. Emotional Disorganisation – early days after departure continued

		Strategies and practical ideas that may help: • Try to remain calm and continue to communicate with your child if behaviour becomes challenging – early deployment difficulties most usually subside with time. • Put words to their feelings – 'I can see you are feeling very angry/sad/worried'. • Be prepared for some questions about death ('Will mummy/daddy kill people or be shot?'). Address these calmly and honestly, even if you are worried about the same thing. • Create a worry box together so that talking about worries is confined to a set time of day and 'posted' out of sight, out of mind. • Predictable bedtime routines and comfort objects – share familiar stories, have a soft nightlight and/or music. • Talk to your doctor or health visitor if bedwetting or other concerning behaviours persist.

4. Recovery and Stabilisation – 2nd month after departure onwards

How children may be feeling:	**Common behaviours:**	**Strategies and practical ideas that may help:**
• Things start to feel normal and settle into a routine. • Increased confidence. • Lift in mood – more positive, creative and funny. • Proud of their ability to help with household jobs. • Made anxious by news reports. • Persistent sense of vulnerability and irrational fears about safety.	• Regressive behaviours settle down and resolve. • Sleep patterns improve. • Able to manage feelings better. • Learning new skills and taking on new responsibilities.	• Keep a scrapbook or memory box of things you are doing whilst the serving person is away, so that children can have a record to share with the returning parent. • Try to filter the amount and type of news from operational areas. Provide opportunities to talk about the absent parent and be sensitive to when children would prefer not to talk. • Model non-fearful behaviour. • Provide predictable separation and reunion routines for drop-offs and pick-ups – be there when you say you will. • Make plans for weekends and holidays. • Seek support from a GP, health visitor or school nurse about any behaviours that are unresolved and continuing to cause concern (such as bedwetting). **Deployed parent –** • Make small and consistent efforts to stay in touch (Submariners and those on remote ops – you might need to be very creative and plan ahead to leave notes for special occasions and surprises before you go. Perhaps a number of special books to read together or a hidden treasure hunt). • When sending postcards, mark an 'X' where you stood on the picture. • Communicate with each child individually, even if it is brief. • Keep a list of things to talk about – ask them about their friends, hobbies, interests. • For young children, tangible objects like letters/ pictures tend to work better than emails or texts.

5. Anticipation of Homecoming – 1 to 2 months before return

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Joyful and excited. • Apprehensive and nervous (particularly older children who may feel that rules will change and newly-won freedoms be lost). • Confused and uncertain – younger children may have difficulty remembering what it was like to be around their serving parent. • Guilty about negative feelings.	• Often will carry on much as normal until close to the event, especially younger children. • May communicate any worries through unpredictable behaviour.	• Send letters from the children to the absent parent, updating them on new skills acquired and things that have changed. • If not discussed prior to deployment, agree between the primary care-giver and serving parent how you will navigate the homecoming with regard to extended family members. • The serving person should take charge of managing expectations on his/her side of the family. It may be necessary to explain the need for the immediate family unit to have time and space to reintegrate before having extended visits. • Ask children how they would like to prepare – would they like to make a banner or a cake? It doesn't matter if they don't, giving the invitation also invites them to mentally prepare for another change. • Explain what will happen. Amid the excitement, try to resist the urge to build up the homecoming into a massive deal – this increases the pressure of expectation of things to be perfect and can add to the stress.

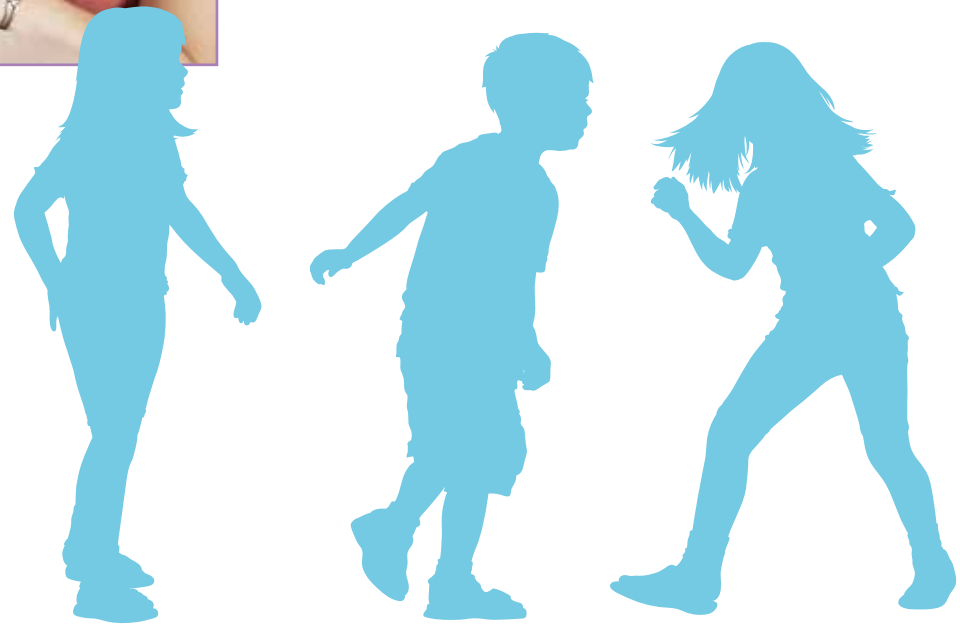
6. Renegotiation – early days after homecoming

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Beginning of sense of being back together as a family. • Enjoying more warmth, closeness and cuddles. • Sense of a loss of freedom and independence – having to be a answerable to another parent. • Resentful and angry at the separation which could not be expressed at the time to the serving parent. • Tense, expecting that everything will be perfect when it may not be. • Unsettled – a sense that things are changing and that renegotiation needs to happen.	• Tendency to default to the primary care-giver for decisions. • Confusion about which parent to ask for things. • Clinginess, shadowing the returning parent. • Seeking attention in both positive and less constructive ways. • Testing to see if both parents will have a united front – playing one off against the other.	• Returning parent: take your cues from the parent who has been the primary care-giver on matters of discipline and rules to begin with. • Resist the urge to dive straight in with discipline until relationships have been firmly re-established. • Allow time for emotional reconnection – if children are a little wary to begin with, this can be upsetting but it will resolve. • Spend time with each child individually, doing an activity of the child's choice. • Share their scrapbook or memory box of what has happened during the deployment. • Build trust by easing in gradually to changes in routines. • Give older children a bit of space and allow them to continue with their normal activities. • Find out about their interests and use those as a springboard to talk. • Ask for their advice about music and technology. • Watch their favourite YouTube channel with them. • Recognise that these early days tend to be emotionally challenging, with changes causing friction and clashes – this is normal and is not a reflection on the quality of relationships or an indication of how things will be in the future.

Feelings and behaviours for primary school-aged children during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

7. Reintegration & stabilisation – 4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment)

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Sense of normality. • Learning to be more relaxed and comfortable with each other.	• More equal expectations from both care-givers. • Understanding and acceptance of rules and boundaries – although older children will continue to test these as a normal part of their development.	• If differences in parenting approaches are making the adjustment challenging, consider undertaking a parenting course or doing some reading together on the subject, so that you can think about how to get back on the same page. • For couples – invest in your own relationship and communication as this is one of the most helpful things you can do for your family. You can access support through Relate for all aspects of couple and family relationships. • Continue to spend one-to-one time with each child doing something they enjoy. • Think about your family traditions and ways you can strengthen the bonds between you while you are together. • Schedule regular family time to have a film night, play games or have a meal together. Have fun.



TEENAGERS: CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS AGE AND STAGE

- Exploring and asserting personal identity.
- Peer relationships take precedence.
- Necessary distancing from parents.
- Testing boundaries and increased independence.
- Risk-taking.
- Emotional brain develops far ahead of the rational brain.
- Developing empathy but still inclined to be self-centred.
- Developing political views and own values.
- Developing and exploring sexual identity.
- Highly connected via the internet and social media.

Feelings and behaviours for teenagers during the stages of the deployment cycle

1. Anticipation of Loss – 4-6 weeks before deployment

How teenagers may be feeling:

- Shocked, in denial, worried, sad.
- Angry, restless, resentful.
- Confused about conflicting feelings.
- Sense of pressure and obligation to make the most of the remaining time, and guilt at negative thoughts.
- Concerned about possible increased responsibility for siblings/household jobs.
- Concerned about keeping up favourite activities.
- Concerned about the parent left at home.
- Worried about what will happen in an emergency.
- Teens who have had positive experiences of deployment before may take the news in their stride, and welcome the opportunity for greater independence and less supervision.
- Responses may depend on the type of deployment and the perceived level of risk to the serving person.

Common behaviours:

- Challenging authority and testing the rules.
- Withdrawal into own space in their room or online.
- Unexpected tears or overreactions to small things.
- Spending more time with friends.
- Acting 'cool' and not bothered.
- Regression to behaviours they had when they were younger.
- Difficulty identifying and talking about their feelings.
- Angry.
- Clingy.

Strategies and practical ideas that may help::

- Listening and asking open questions to help them to talk. Be available to speak as much as you can.
- Answer their concerns honestly.
- Try not to overburden them, but talk about how you feel and things that help you. Sometimes this can give 'permission' for them to talk about feelings they feel guilty about having. Offer reassurance that their feelings are normal.
- You might want to try some 'constructive wallowing' together (see resources).
- Remind your teen of difficult situations they have coped with in the past and talk about ways they can approach the new challenges.
- If the deployment is risky, talk about how well prepared the serving person is, how their team trains and works together to keep each other safe. Talk about where the serving person is going and what they will do. Find out information about it together.
- Decide together how you want to communicate as a family, whether that is through emails, WhatsApp, or other social media.
- Take the opportunity to check that your teen's privacy settings are secure, and that they understand what information they can and cannot share about the serving person's activities.
- Agree as a family what you each expect in terms of contact, and explain what the limitations are likely to be.
- If a serving parent is able to access social media, it is preferable for them to make contact directly with their teen before posting publicly, to reinforce the importance of the special bond they have with their young person.
- If your teen will assume more caring responsibilities for siblings or family members while the serving person is away, talk to the school about support, particularly if they are caring for someone with additional needs or a disability.

2. Detachment and Withdrawal – last days before departure

How teenagers may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Sad. • Worried. • Anxious. • Emotionally detached. • Withdrawn. • Guilty. • Responsible for the serving person leaving – may feel at fault as the situation is hard to understand. • Impatient to 'get it over with'. • Frustrated (particularly if departure is delayed).	• Lashing out, arguing. • Unwilling to talk about their worries. • Withdrawn and avoiding feelings. • Wanting to be out with their mates. • Curious and needing information. • Changes in mood, eating and sleeping patterns.	• Avoid placing inappropriate responsibility on teens by telling them that they are 'the woman/man of the house' while the serving person is away. • Don't tell them to 'look after mum/dad'. • Let school and other care-givers know about the deployment. • Keep to your usual family routines right up to the day of departure. • Consider organising something special, like a family party or outing to look back on. • Invite your teen to help the serving person pack, but only if they want to. • Make plans for how you will stay in contact if you haven't already discussed this. • Plan for what will happen during special occasions while the serving person is away – write in birthday cards or choose gifts. • Spend time with each teen individually. • Acknowledge and name feelings honestly and openly. • Keep goodbyes short.

IF A SERVING PARENT IS ABLE TO ACCESS SOCIAL MEDIA, IT IS PREFERABLE FOR THEM TO MAKE CONTACT DIRECTLY WITH THEIR TEEN BEFORE POSTING PUBLICLY, TO REINFORCE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPECIAL BOND THEY HAVE WITH THEIR YOUNG PERSON.

Feelings and behaviours for teenagers during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

3. Emotional Disorganisation – early days after departure

How teenagers may be feeling:

- Shocked.
- Relieved (may be followed with guilt at feeling relieved).
- Numb.
- Pained.
- Lonely.
- Anxious.
- Angry.
- Sense of anti-climax.
- Sense of disruption.
- Sense of loss/ emptiness.
- Sense of being overwhelmed.
- Resentful about additional chores and/or caring responsibilities.
- Sense of isolation from peers who may not understand the situation.

Common behaviours:

- A rise in complaints about stomach aches, headaches, or other illnesses.
- More sensitive than usual.
- Sudden or unusual problems at school (e.g. does not want to go, not paying attention, general complaining, getting into trouble) or outside school.
- Anger towards at-home parent.
- Testing the limits to see if the rules are the same.
- Low self-esteem and self-criticism.
- Misdirected anger (disproportionate anger over small things; directed at siblings/parent).
- Drop in performance in school.
- Loss of interest in usual interests and hobbies.
- Dealing with feelings through indirect means (changes in eating habits, exercise, sexual activity, use of alcohol/drugs).

Strategies and practical ideas that may help:

- Recognise that the teenage years are marked by challenging rules and boundaries at the best of times, but look out for behaviours that are uncharacteristic for your teenager.
- If you are concerned about their behaviour, speak to a trusted member of staff at school or your GP.
- Try to remain calm and continue to communicate with your child even if behaviour becomes challenging. Early deployment difficulties most usually subside with time.
- Put words to their feelings – 'You seem very angry/ sad/worried.'
- Teens may try to keep up a brave face, so try to be available to talk about concerns even if it appears that they do not want to.
- Try to maintain rules and boundaries that existed prior to the deployment.
- Reach out to your adult support network to avoid over-burdening teens who may feel responsible for caring for you.
- Ease off on articulating expectations of attainment/ high marks at school.
- Be compassionate but firm about attendance and homework.
- Have your teen keep devices and charge their phone outside their bedroom so that they can sleep and have some down time, especially if the deployed person is on an operation with a high media profile.
- Listen to your 'gut feeling' if you sense that something is not quite right – seek professional advice/help

4. Recovery and Stabilisation – 2nd month after departure onwards

How teenagers may be feeling:

- Things start to feel normal and settle into a routine.
- Increased confidence and independence.
- Lift in mood – more positive, creative and funny.
- Proud of ability to help with household jobs.
- Stressed, arising from additional responsibilities.
- Anxious about news reports.

Common behaviours:

- Cultivating friendships and sources of support.
- Taking on new responsibilities in the home.
- Increasing independence and confidence.
- Wanting their views to be taken into consideration and a more 'adult' role.
- Testing rules and boundaries (the job of all teenagers!).
- Wanting increased freedom.
- Trying out a new image.

Strategies and practical ideas that may help:

- Try to filter the amount and type of news from operational areas. This is more of a challenge with teens – open a discussion about things that they may have read or seen on YouTube.
- Provide opportunities to talk about the absent parent and be sensitive to when children would prefer not to talk.
- Model non-fearful behaviour.
- Share 'ordinary conversations' about things that both you and they think about – social media, fashion, music, what's on TV, how your day has been etc.
- Make plans for weekends and holidays.
- Seek support from a GP, school nurse or teacher about any behaviours that are continuing to cause concern.
- Maintain rules and boundaries, but recognise that changes will occur and renegotiation will take place during the deployment.

Deployed parent –

- Make small and consistent efforts to stay in touch if you can.
- Communicate with each young person individually, even if it is brief.
- Keep a list of things to talk about – ask them about their friends, hobbies, interests.
- Time invested by the serving person in maintaining the bond with their teen will pay dividends later.
- Expect it to be a one-way street and keep in contact as much as you can, even if your teen does not respond. Any contact you do receive in return is a bonus.

5. Anticipation of Homecoming – 1 to 2 months before return

How teenagers may be feeling:

- Joyous and excited.
- Apprehensive and nervous (may feel that rules will change and newly-won freedoms be lost).
- Worried about what the absent parent will think about actions they have taken.
- Guilty about negative feelings.

Common behaviours:

- May or may not wish to be involved in preparations for the homecoming.
- Appearing aloof and not bothered about it.
- Continuing focus on friendships with peers.

Strategies and practical ideas that may help:

- If not discussed prior to deployment, agree between the primary care-giver and serving parent how you will navigate the homecoming with regard to extended family members.
- The serving person should take charge of managing expectations on his/her side of the family. It may be necessary to explain the need for the immediate family unit to have time and space to reintegrate before having extended visits. No one wants their first row to take place in front of their in-laws.
- Ask teens to think about how they would like to prepare – would they like to make a banner or a cake? It doesn't matter if they don't, giving the invitation also invites them to mentally prepare for another change.
- Try to resist the urge to build up the homecoming into a massive deal – this increases the pressure of expectation of things to be perfect and can add to the stress.

Feelings and behaviours for teenagers during the stages of the deployment cycle continued

6. Renegotiation – early days after homecoming

How teenagers may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Beginning to sense being back together as a family. • Sense of a loss of freedom and independence – having to be answerable to another parent. • Resentful and angry at the separation which could not be expressed at the time to the serving parent. • Tense, expecting that everything will be perfect when it may not be. • Feeling 'hemmed in' – a lot more togetherness and pressure to get along. • Unsettled – a sense that things are changing and that renegotiation needs to happen.	• Testing boundaries and limits. • Clashes over how much time they spend at home. • 'Checking out' or retreating to their bedroom/social media.	• Returning parent: take your cues from the parent who has been the primary care-giver on matters of discipline and rules to begin with. • Resist the urge to dive straight in with discipline until relationships have been firmly re-established. • Allow time for emotional reconnection. • Hang out with your teen one-to-one doing something they enjoy, eg a computer game, watching a sport, cooking a meal. • Give teens space and allow them to continue with their normal activities. • Find out about their interests and use those as a springboard to talk. • Ask for their advice about music and technology. • Watch their favourite YouTube channel with them. • Use time in the car or out for a walk to strike up a conversation – it feels less intimidating to teens than a one-to-one involving eye contact. • Recognise that these early days tend to be emotionally challenging, with changes causing friction and clashes – this is normal and is not a reflection on the quality of relationships or an indication of how things will be in the future.

7. Reintegration & stabilisation – 4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment)

How teenagers may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
• Sense of normality. • Learning to be more relaxed and comfortable with each other.	• Understanding and accepting rules and boundaries – although they will continue to test these as a normal part of their development.	• If differences in parenting styles are making the adjustment challenging, consider undertaking a parenting course together so that you can think about how to get back on the same page. • For couples – invest in your own relationship and communication as this is one of the most helpful things you can do for your family. You can access support through Relate for all aspects of couple and family relationships. • Continue to spend one-to-one time with each teen doing something they enjoy. • Think about your family traditions and ways you can strengthen the bonds between you while you are together, doing things you all enjoy and that allow communication.


AWW

USE OF THE TERM 'RESILIENCE' IN RELATION TO SERVICE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'RESILIENCE'?

We hear the term 'resilience' used a lot in discussions about mental well-being, and in the context of Service children. The term refers to the ability of a person to recover quickly from adversity and difficulties, and is associated with a kind of inner strength. People who are resilient tend to bounce back from challenges and 'put their best foot forward'. Children who show that they are developing in a healthy way, despite having circumstances stacked against them, are often described as resilient. Resilience is generally considered to be a desirable characteristic for Service children to develop.

ARE SERVICE CHILDREN RESILIENT?

Another thing that we hear a lot is the statement: 'children are resilient'. This is said about Service children regularly, often in the context of discussions around how they should be supported in schools. Service children often appear to be resilient. This apparent resilience is sometimes fragile, and can mask what is really happening for a child or young person.

Here's the thing: children are not any more resilient than adults. In fact, mostly they are a lot less resilient than adults. They haven't yet had the opportunity to develop coping mechanisms and strategies for dealing with hard knocks. We see this when children lose their cool over things that seem petty to us. Compared to our sometimes whopping great problems, their meltdown over not being invited to Chloe's birthday (or whatever the issue is) seems ridiculous. The temptation to tell them to 'suck it up' (or a nicely dressed-up version of that) is sometimes overwhelming. Our adult perspective on things was learned through repeated experiences of tackling tricky situations. If we were looking at our children's problems through the same lens as them, we would most likely find them difficult too. Bear in mind, as well, a child's meltdown is often over as quickly as it started. They forget it and move on, but the adults are often left holding the 'bad' feelings for much longer.

LISTENING AND RESPONDING

As parents, we are coming at this with the best of intentions. We hope that by getting them to take it on the chin, we will help them to be a bit tougher. We don't want them to cave in over every little thing. We want to raise our children to be strong and not whiney. We find it very hard to hear children talk about their pain, and this is especially the case when we are finding life hard ourselves. We need them to be okay. If we are not careful, we can end up minimising their experiences, and telling them they are fine when they don't feel fine. This makes it harder for them to talk about how they are really doing.

So – let's be careful about describing Service children as resilient without thinking very carefully about what we really mean. Let's be very sure that we are responding to children and young people with the empathy and compassion that is appropriate for their level of experience. Let's encourage them to speak about how they feel, and really listen to them. They will learn to cope with hard things, but not through shutting up and sucking it up. Children become resilient through having a manageable amount of challenge that does not overwhelm them. And through having the right support when they need it.

You can find out more about ways to help your child on the 'Boingboing' website, listed in the back of this publication.

CO-PARENTING WHEN ONE OF YOU ISN'T THERE – BEING ON THE SAME TEAM

SHARING PARENTING

In a shared parenting situation, where care-givers have differing parenting styles, there may be conflict and confusion for children and parents, as they try to work out how to approach things. For example, a parent who comes home and attempts to assert their authority without first investing time in re-establishing an emotional connection may receive a negative response from their partner and/or children. A parent who attempts to make up for time away by buying toys, or by letting a child off for poor behaviour, may undermine the person who normally looks after the child. It is natural to want to make up for lost time, but there are no shortcuts.

Difficult feelings and a certain amount of conflict are normal. It can help to work on ways to communicate better, and to learn how to argue more constructively. Some good resources are listed at the back of this publication. It may also be helpful to think about your respective parenting styles, and work out how you can approach matters as a team and with some degree of consistency.

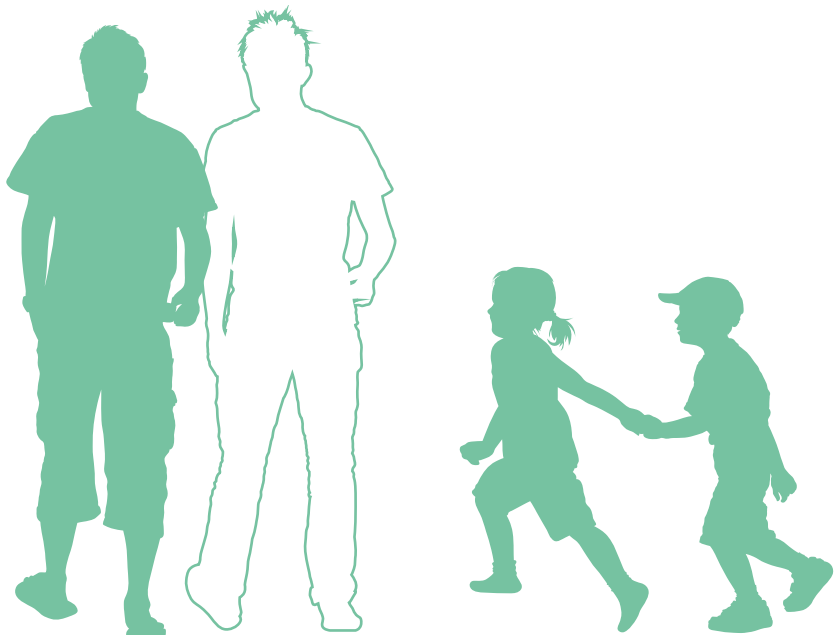
WHAT'S YOUR PARENTING STYLE?

When thinking about how you approach parenting, consider your own parenting 'style', and that of any other person who is acting in a parenting role (eg your spouse, partner, or family member or friend who may be caring for your child). Having an awareness of this can help you to navigate transitions, such as returning from a deployment, or weekending. When you know how you tend to approach parenting, you are in a better position to work as a team with other people who care for your child. You can then work together towards a more consistent approach which is more effective and responsive to your child's needs.

A developmental psychologist called Diana Baumrind devised a model in the 1960s to help us think about parenting styles[9]. Her ideas are still commonly used today. She identified three styles which she called:

- Authoritarian
- Authoritative
- Permissive

Researchers Maccoby and Martin made a further distinction between indulgent (or permissive) parenting and neglectful (uninvolved) parenting[10].



The types of parenting are summarised in the table below:

	Parenting approach/characteristics	Effects in child/young person
Authoritarian	• Strict rules. • High expectations. • Obedience is expected. • Unwanted behaviour is punished. • Less openly affectionate. • Finds it hard to express praise. • Control, routines and structure.	• Poor self-esteem. • Sense of self-worth tied to 'success'. • Anxiety. • 'Follower' mentality. • Rebellion.
Authoritative	• Clear rules and limits. • Firm, but warm and responsive. • High, yet reasonable, expectations. • Encourages independence. • Uses praise and clear consequences. • Routines and structure. • Children contribute and have a say.	• Sense of security. • Confidence. • Ability to get along with others. • Able to express feelings constructively.
Permissive	• No or few rules and limits. • Warm and responsive. • Indulgent. • Children do their own thing. • No routines or structure.	• Difficulty regulating feelings. • Difficulty dealing with challenges. • Difficulty fitting in. • Anxiety. • Sense of entitlement. • Rebellion/defiance. • Higher chance of antisocial/risky behaviour.
Neglectful	• No rules, routines or structure. • Provide only basic needs, or less. • Uninvolved, 'hands off' approach. • Indifferent. • Show little warmth or affection. • Often overwhelmed by own problems.	• Emotionally withdrawn. • Anxiety. • Tend to perform poorly at school. • Rebellion/defiance. • Higher chance of antisocial/risky behaviour.

For many reasons, parents' ways of raising children will differ. We tend to have a default position, based on our own upbringing, culture, choices and circumstances, which exhibits characteristics from the categories above. We learn about parenting from our own childhood experiences, and sometimes this sets the tone for our own approach if we do not consciously make other choices.

An 'authoritative' style is considered to be the most effective both in terms of managing behaviour and also for developing well-adjusted, thriving children. Of course, while this might be something to aspire to, it is important to remember that we don't have to, and can't, respond perfectly to every situation. We will make mistakes, and that's okay.

Sometimes we may find ourselves veering between parenting styles according to current circumstances. For example:

- A normally confident parent who is suddenly overwhelmed by a life event such as a bereavement, may become 'neglectful' for a period of time and need extra support.
- A parent returning from an operational environment, where there is a lot of structure and little scope for recognising and addressing emotions, may tend towards an 'authoritarian' approach. This may also happen if they feel they need to re-establish their authority in the home.
- A parent who is sees a child in a dangerous situation may behave in a way that we might associate with a more 'authoritarian' style, issuing a direct command to deal with the immediate risk of harm.
- A parent returning from time away may behave in a way that is 'permissive', allowing a child to stay up past an established bedtime, or buying more sweets than would usually be allowed, in order to be in favour with the child.
- A parent returning from time away might perceive his or her partner to be parenting in a more 'permissive' way, if their partner is ignoring some of a child's poor behaviour This may be a temporary coping strategy used by the home-based partner. They may be selectively 'picking their battles' so that they have the energy to address the behaviours that really matter. Or they may be tired and need some support.

Whatever your parenting style, it can be helpful to think about this and discuss it with anyone who is co-parenting with you. It can really help if you can both agree on a common approach, and support each other as a team. This may provide some consistency and predictability that is helpful to your child. It may also help you in your relationship with the other person. If you find it hard to communicate constructively about shared parenting, support is available from Relate and other agencies. Contact details are at the back of this resource.

IN SITUATIONS WHERE ONE PARENT IS FREQUENTLY ABSENT OR AWAY FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME, IT IS INEVITABLE THAT THERE WILL BE CHALLENGES TO SHARED PARENTING.

PARENTAL GATEKEEPING

What do we mean by 'gatekeeping'?

This term is used to describe when one parent restricts the other parent's involvement in co-parenting a child. Often it is the mother acting as a gatekeeper, but this situation can arise for fathers and in same-sex families. It can occur in families where both parents live together, and in families with absent, separated or divorced parents. Gatekeeping can take many forms, but this section will look at a situation that frequently arises in families that experience considerable parental absence as a result of Service life.

Part of the job of being a parent is to keep a child safe. We create protective boundaries around our children, particularly while they are young, and try to filter out influences which are less positive. We make decisions about who has access to our children, and choose who is permitted to do what and with whom.

In situations where one parent is frequently absent or away for long periods of time, it is inevitable that there will be challenges to shared parenting. The parent at home has more information about what is going on in the child's life and will typically be more attuned to the child's emotional, social and physical needs than the absent parent. This can set up a dynamic where the at-home parent has considerably more power in their parenting role. Parents-to-be who have been away while their partner is pregnant at home start on a very unequal footing, as they may have missed being involved in decision-making and preparations even before the baby is born.

When one parent has been in charge for a long time at home, they may have a hard time in handing over the reins to a returning co-parent. They may feel that the returning parent is less competent, or not fully on board with their style of parenting. It may take time for the returning parent to become attuned to the needs of their children, who may have changed and developed considerably in the time the family has spent apart. Parents may have different approaches to risk. For example one parent may enjoy a lot of 'rough and tumble' play with their children, while the other is gentler. Parents returning from more extreme operational environments may find the transition even more challenging, and the at-home parent may feel very protective of their children while everyone adjusts.

Particularly where the at-home parent has made sacrifices to support the serving person's career, either by stepping back in their own career, or by relocating, they may feel that their role as a parent is very closely linked with their personal identity. This is not a bad thing in itself, but it can contribute to gatekeeping behaviour.

Is parental gatekeeping a bad thing?

A certain amount of parental gatekeeping is to be expected, and is part of the normal transition process when a family is reunited. Ideally, a parent returning from time away will take their cues from what is happening at home, and co-parents will communicate about how they wish to move forward.

TRY TO

STEER AWAY FROM CRITICISING EACH OTHER'S PARENTING, BUT COMMENT ON THE THINGS YOU DO LIKE.

Gatekeeping can become potentially damaging when children are deprived of a full relationship with the parent who is spending more time away. This is not only an issue for children, who may miss out on the time and attention of another parent. It can also have a negative effect on the adults involved. The more one parent takes on, the more the other tends to back off. This can set up a vicious circle where one parent becomes increasingly less confident and competent. Criticism of the way the returning parent does things can lead to conflict in the relationship. Some parents will then abdicate responsibility for childcare and domestic support, which is undesirable when the at-home parent already shoulders so much responsibility. Opportunities for the at-home parent to spend time with friends, do other activities, or take a break, may be lost. In a wider context, parental gatekeeping may perpetuate gender inequality and stereotypes.

How do we deal with it?

Unless it is genuinely unsafe, or there is some other very compelling reason why not, it is preferable for a returning parent to have the opportunity to be involved in the care and upbringing of their children.

If the returning parent has made a mistake in the past or said something that makes it hard for the at-home parent to trust them, this needs to be addressed. It may need them to apologise and to recognise how to make amends for things to move forward. Sometimes the support of a counsellor or mediator can be of help in this situation.

Try to steer away from criticising each other's parenting, but comment on the things you do like. Avoid perfectionism, and let go of thinking that there is a 'right' way to do things. Try not to take feedback personally. Recognise that renegotiating your parenting may feel uncomfortable on both sides at times. There may be a lot of anxiety in letting go for the parent who has been doing the lion's share of the childcare. Be patient with each other. Create some space for the returning parent to be alone with their child, especially those who are weekending and can give the at-home parent a break. Take baby steps and try to keep a sense of humour if possible. Mistakes and mess will happen. This is how things change.

ON THE HOME FRONT – MANAGING PARENTING ALONE

The thing that the cabin crew say when they deliver the safety brief on an aeroplane applies here. You have to put your own oxygen mask on first, before you help anyone else. Including helping your kids. In a nutshell, you have to take care of yourself.

Many of the things people say about 'self-care' can sound a bit cheesy, or rather boring and difficult, to be honest. On a good day we might go for a brisk walk and eat reasonably healthy food, instead of troughing through the children's leftover fish fingers and a whole packet of biscuits. But on a bad day, we might feel more inclined to reduce our stress by having a stiff drink and being a bit shouty. When people talk about 'self-care', and things are quite stressful, it can be tempting to respond with eye rolling and miming sticking a finger down one's throat. The hackles go up and we can feel that they just don't understand. But the truth is that we have to take care of ourselves if we want to take care of our children and young people. And this stuff works.

What follows is not a list of things to beat yourself up with if you can't manage to do them. It's more of a tasting menu of things to try out, and figure out what works for you. You can try any of them, or not. What you don't need to do is to layer on any self-criticism. Most of us already know what we 'should' be doing. We don't need to be made to feel worse or to feel as if we have failed in some way. So let's try to take the 'should' out of this, and say that if you can manage to do any small thing that makes you feel good, that's brilliant.

Talk to yourself with kindness and compassion. Imagine you are talking to a friend you care about very much.

Research shows that the following things can help to boost our well-being.[11]

CONNECT WITH OTHER PEOPLE

This can be hard if you have recently moved, or you have moved multiple times. It can be difficult to motivate yourself to reach out to others and form new friendships if you know you are moving on. But we do need relationships and a support network.

We need to be able to give and receive support. Naval Service families often find this tricky because they, not unreasonably, like to look like they have 'got their act together'. This can sometimes get in the way of opening up and asking for help when we need it. All parents can benefit from support. It makes us more relaxed, and our children learn by watching us give and receive help. They learn that they don't have to go it alone. They learn that is okay to ask for help. They see the value of helping other people and of being helped. This is important because you are modelling strategies that your children can use in the future.

Nobody 'gets it' quite like someone who has been in your situation. If you live a long distance from other Armed Forces families (and many Naval Service families do) you may need to find connections through a social media group. The moderated groups run by Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare may be a good starting point.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Yes, of course, this was bound to be on the list. It doesn't have to be running a marathon (unless this is your thing). It could be something really small to begin with – get out for a short walk, move away from the desk for a stretch and to stand outside for a moment, take the stairs instead of the lift, get off the bus one stop earlier or park on the far side of the car park. By joining a walking group, or doing the Parkrun, you can meet other like-minded people. Physical activity can help to alleviate depression, improve self-esteem, and reduce stress and anxiety. Of course when you are feeling a bit low, it can be hard to get started. Set yourself little goals. Do something you actually like doing. Be kind to yourself. Remember to celebrate your successes, however small.

LEARN A NEW SKILL

This could be anything from baking a loaf of bread to getting a new qualification. It could be something very simple, or something very challenging. There is good evidence that shows that learning new skills and ideas throughout life makes us feel more positive and optimistic. It can also provide ways to meet other people and develop social networks. Using video tutorials at home, or 'virtual learning' online, can be great ways to access new ideas if you are stuck for childcare.

TALK TO YOURSELF WITH KINDNESS AND COMPASSION. IMAGINE YOU ARE TALKING TO A FRIEND YOU CARE ABOUT VERY MUCH.

GIVE TO OTHERS

This doesn't have to be your money. Unless you want to give it, of course. You will have come across people carrying out acts of kindness, like giving up a seat on a train, buying a cup of coffee for a stranger, or being considerate when driving. These kinds of behaviours not only make us feel good, they are contagious. Sometime focusing outside ourselves can help us to get some perspective on our own situation. You don't have to do big things. If you have time, and want to connect with other people or learn something new, you could try volunteering, either at a one-off event or as a regular thing.

MINDFULNESS

This means paying attention to what is happening in the present moment – noticing details in the world around you, and in yourself, right now. It is something you can practise to help when unhelpful thought patterns take over. Many people find it helpful. Although it's not complicated, it does take a bit of practice. There are a number of apps for mobile devices that may be helpful, or look in the resources section at the back of this booklet for further reading.

GET FURTHER SUPPORT

There are times when we all struggle to take care of ourselves and to be the kind of parents we want to be. If you need further support, please do reach out for it. There are some websites and contact details at the back of this resource. A good starting point may be to talk to your GP or Health Visitor if you have one. Support is out there. You are not alone.

ALL PARENTS CAN BENEFIT FROM SUPPORT. IT MAKES US MORE RELAXED, AND OUR CHILDREN LEARN BY WATCHING US GIVE AND RECEIVE HELP. THEY LEARN THAT THEY DON'T HAVE TO GO IT ALONE. THEY LEARN THAT IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP. THEY SEE THE VALUE OF HELPING OTHER PEOPLE AND OF BEING HELPED. THIS IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE YOU ARE MODELLING STRATEGIES THAT YOUR CHILDREN CAN USE IN THE FUTURE.


F236

FINAL THOUGHTS

We hope that this publication is helpful to you, whatever your connection to Royal Navy and Royal Marines families.

If you are a professional working with Naval Service parents, children or young people, thank you for your interest. Please consider how you might utilise this information in your setting to improve understanding of serving families' lifestyles and the support offered to families with an absent parent.

If you are in a Royal Navy or Royal Marines family and are coping with parental absence, we salute you. We know that serving people, spouses, partners, and children often feel unappreciated when it comes to recognising the sacrifices that they make in family life. The Naval Service can only operate effectively with the support of family members. Thank you for everything you, your children and your young people accept and endure as part of being a Royal Navy or Royal Marines family.

If you have constructive feedback about this resource, or want to talk to us about any of the issues raised, please get in touch with the Naval Families Federation via the contact details on our website: **www.nff.org.uk**

SOURCES OF SUPPORT AND INFORMATION (LISTED ALPHABETICALLY)

Big White Wall

https://register.bigwhitewall.com/?language=EN

Online mental health and well-being service. Free for UK serving personnel, veterans and their families, and some UK universities and colleges.

Boingboing

www.boingboing.org.uk

Network providing opportunities to learn about resilience. Links to free resources, including a Resilience Framework, to help schools develop academic resilience. Parents may also find the resources helpful.

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

www.thecalmzone.net

Helpline: 0800 58 58 58

Offers support to men, young and old, in the UK who are feeling down or in a crisis.

Carers Trust

www.carers.org/about-us/about-young-carers

Helps young carers to cope with their caring role through specialised services across the UK.

Child Helpline International

www.childhelplineinternational.org/child-helplines/child-helpline-network

A website that hosts contact details for child helplines across the globe, for children outside of the UK.

Childline

www.childline.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 1111

A confidential UK helpline for children who want to talk about any problem, however big or small.

Children's Education Advisory Service

www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-childrens-education-advisory-service-ceas

Email: dcyp-ceas-enquiries@mod.gov.uk

MOD service providing advice, support and guidance regarding the educational well-being of the children and young people belonging to families in the UK Armed Forces.

Children's Society

www.childrenssociety.org.uk/youngcarer/help-for-young-people

Advice and resources for young carers, and information on how to connect with other young carers.

Combat Stress mental health support line

www.combatstress.org.uk/helpline

Telephone: 0800 323 4444 (serving personnel and their families) or **0800 138 1619** (Veterans and their families)

Email: helpline@combatstress.org.uk

Free confidential advice and support for serving people and their families. Advice for family members or carers worried about the mental health of a loved one. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Home-Start

www.home-start.org.uk

Home-Start supports families around the UK where there is at least one child under the age of five, offering home visits, family groups and social events.

Little Troopers

www.littletroopers.net

Charity supporting children with parents serving in the British Armed Forces. Provides the Little Troopers Treasures App which allows parents to video record stories.

Military Kids Club Heroes

www.mkcheroes.co.uk

Tri-Service network of after-school clubs. Brings together members of Service families aged between three and 18 years old from all over the country. Any school can join.

The Mix

www.themix.org.uk

Freephone: 0808 808 4994 (13:00-23:00 daily)

Confidential helpline, email, webchat and telephone counselling service for young people under 25.

Naval Chaplaincy Service

Gives pastoral care and spiritual leadership to men and women of the Naval Service and their families. You can find a Chaplain through your unit or the nearest Naval Base.

Naval Families Federation

www.nff.org.uk

Email: ContactUs@nff.org.uk

Speaking up on behalf of currently serving Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel and their families to those in positions of power. Working to remove disadvantage arising from Service life.

Reading Force

www.readingforce.org.uk

Shared reading initiative encouraging families to read, talk, and scrapbook about books.

Relate

www.relate.org.uk/royal-navy-and-royal-marines-counselling

Telephone: 01302 380279

Free relationship counselling support for serving and veteran Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel and/or their partners and family. Face-to-face, by telephone, webcam or live chat, even if you are overseas.

Royal Caledonian Education Trust

www.rcet.org.uk

Armed Forces children's charity in Scotland seeking to support Service children and young people to reach their full potential.

Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund

www.rnrmchildrensfund.org.uk

Telephone: 023 9263 9534

Charity dedicated to supporting children whose parents serve, or have served, in the Royal Navy or Royal Marines, providing help when not available from family or statutory sources.

Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare

www.royalnavy.mod.uk/welfare/rnrmw

Telephone: +44 (0) 2392 728777

Service support for Naval Service personnel, their families and communities. Social work service for Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel and their families, community support, information, a moderated online forum and social media groups.

The Samaritans

www.samaritans.org

Telephone: 116 123

Free 24-hour helpline, 365 days a year, for you to talk any time you like, in your own way – about whatever's getting to you. You don't have to be suicidal to call.

Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru

www.sscecymru.co.uk/home

A project to support Service children in education in Wales.

Service Children in State Schools (SCISS)

www.gov.uk/government/publications/service-children-in-state-schools-handbook

An affiliation of state-maintained schools in England with Service children on roll. Led by an advisory group that informs the Government about effective practice and current issues.

Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance)

www.scipalliance.org

Partnership of organisations focused on improving outcomes for children from military families. Website hosts research and resources for practitioners.

SSAFA: the Armed Forces Charity

www.ssafa.org.uk

Charity providing support to Armed Forces families including specialised support to those with additional needs. Hosts the Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum (FANDF).

Storybook Waves

www.aggies.org.uk/storybook-waves-2

Email: storybookwaves@aggies.org.uk

Helps members of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines maintain the link with their children by recording a bedtime story for them to listen to when a parent is serving away from home.

Thinkuknow – Internet Safety

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Resources for different age groups (children from five upwards) and for parents, made by CEOP. Contains films, Q&As, advice and solutions, to online issues such as understanding privacy, bullying, grooming, sexting, selfies and more.

YoungMinds

www.youngminds.org.uk

UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. Resources and information for children, young people and parents, and a parents' helpline.

RECOMMENDED READING

ADULT SELF-HELP BOOKS

The Chimp Paradox – Professor Steve Peters

ISBN: 978-0-09-193558-0

A readable and interesting book by a consultant psychiatrist. It can help you to understand how your brain works, how to understand yourself and others, and how to deal with challenges.

The Silent Guides – Professor Steve Peters

ISBN: 978-1788700016

A book to help adults, particularly parents and carers, to develop healthy and constructive behaviours and beliefs, and support their children to do the same.

Constructive Wallowing: How to Beat Bad Feelings by Letting Yourself Have Them – Tina Gilbertson

ISBN: 978-1-936740-80-2

Psychotherapist Tina Gilbertson's book provides a model to help readers to accept difficult feelings and to practise self-compassion, as a route to greater emotional health and well-being.

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World – Mark Williams and Dr Danny Penman

ISBN: 978-0-7499-5308-9

Based on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and is as effective as medication for preventing depression. It also works for people who aren't depressed but want to cope better with the demands of the modern world. There is a free App based on this book for Android and iPhone.

BOOKS FOR PARENTS (LISTED BY AGE AND STAGE)

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families – Stephen R. Covey

ISBN: 978-0-3074-4085-3

Quite an old classic by now, but if you are looking for a resource to help you to think about how to get on the same page, this might be for you. It is a pretty thick, comprehensive book, which might appeal to those who like a meaty read and a deep think. It has practical tips and ideas for things to do with children, and is especially good on communication and listening.

How to Talk so Little Kids will Listen: A Survival Guide to Life with Children Aged 2-7 – Joanna Faber and Julie King

ISBN: 978-1-84812-614-5

Strategies for handling little people's big emotions, getting co-operation, dealing with conflict and much more. Includes a section for kids with autism and sensory issues.

How to Talk so Kids will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk – Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

ISBN: 978-1-84812-309-0

Practical ways to help children handle their feelings and encourage positive behaviour, with specific examples.

How to Talk so Teens will Listen and Listen so Teens will Talk – Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

ISBN: 978-1-85340-857-1

Guidance for helping teens to navigate feelings, keep the channels of communication open, and work out solutions. A fairly compact book with practical advice.

Get Out of My Life…But First Take Me and Alex into Town – Tony Wolfe and Suzanne Franks

ISBN: 978-1781253311

Readable book that gives useful insights into why teens behave in the way they do. It tackles all the difficult issues in a way that is both realistic and reassuring for parents.

Blame my Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed – Nicola Morgan

ISBN: 978-1-4063-4693-0

Suitable for teens and parents, this book explains the biology and psychology behind the feelings and behaviour.

The Big Disconnect – Danah Boyd

ISBN: 978-0-06-208243-5

Insights and advice from a clinical psychologist about access to the internet and social media.

It's Complicated – Catherine Steiner-Adair

ISBN: 978-0-300-19900-0

Fascinating read about the way young people use social media and the internet. Helpful for parents seeking to understand the reasons behind teen behaviours.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN ABOUT PARENTAL ABSENCE

Picture books for primary school children (listed alphabetically by author's surname)

My Father's Shirt – Sally Huss

ISBN: 978-0-6925-8977-9

A simple story about a boy who wears his dad's shirt when his father is away. It helps him to feel connected and to remember that he is loved.

Billie Templar's War – Ellie Irving

ISBN: 978-0-552-56360-4

11 year old Billie misses her dad. He's a soldier and has been away for seven weeks. When one of the other soldiers in Dad's regiment is seriously hurt, Billie decides her dad must come home.

Leon and Bob – Simon James

ISBN: 978-1-4063-0849-5

Leon's dad is away in the Army and he has moved to a new house with his mum. A story about making new friends.

The Invisible String – Patricia Karst

ISBN: 978-0-87516-734-3

Mum tells her twins that they're all connected by an Invisible String. Mums and dads feel the tug whenever kids give it; and kids feel the tug that comes right back. No one is ever alone.

My Daddy's Going Away and Mummy's Home – Lieutenant Colonel Christopher MacGregor

ISBN: 978-0552567251 (Daddy) or
978-0552567275 (Mummy)

Helps to explain why dads or mums sometimes have to go away and shows ways to help children cope.

Lily Hates Goodbyes – Jerilyn Marler

ISBN: 978-1-936214-78-5

Lily's dad is going away on deployment. Her mum supports her. They get through the difficult feelings and find ways to be happy even though they miss him. This book has US spellings.

Zoe and the Time Rabbit – Sarah McMenemy

Available as a hard copy and as a digital download from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund. Follows Zoe and her emotions over the time her daddy is away until he returns to her.

My Hidden Chimp – Professor Steve Peters

ISBN: 978-1787413719

Not a book about deployment, but includes practical exercises and activities for children, to help them to understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Sometimes: My Mummy's Gone Away with Work and Sometimes: My Daddy's Gone Away with Work – Clare Shaw

ISBN: 978-0-9957596-1-9 (Mummy) or
978-0-9957596-0-2 (Daddy)

Aimed at helping Service children cope with the conflicting emotions that can arise from parental absence. There is a 'mum' and a 'dad' version.

BOOKS FOR TEENS

Get Out of Your Mind and into Your Life for Teens – Joseph Ciarrochi

ISBN: 978-1-60882-193-8

A workbook that encourages skills for coping with difficult and sometimes overwhelming emotions.

Fighting Invisible Tigers – Earl Hipp

ISBN: 978-1-57542-282-4

A book of 'tiger-taming' techniques – everyday strategies to help young people deal with stress.

Stuff That Sucks – Ben Sedley

ISBN: 978-1-4721-2053-3

A book for teens about difficult feelings which contains ideas and practical activities to help.

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World

Listed fully in the adult section above, the free app may be particularly useful for teens.

REFERENCES

1. RAND Corporation (2009). *Military children face more emotional challenges, as parental deployments grow longer*. Science Daily 2009. **www.sciencedaily.com /releases/2009/12/091207095503.htm** Accessed 10 September 2018.
2. Rowe SL, Keeling M, Wessely S and Fear NT (2014). *Perceptions of the impact a military career has on children*. Occupational Medicine Advance Access 2017. **www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/2014/Rowe2014.pdf** Accessed 10 September 2018).
3. Jain V, Stevelink SAM, Fear NT (2016). *What are the best and worst things about having a father in UK Armed Forces?* Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps published online June 6, 2016.
4. Fear NT, Reed V, Rowe S et al (2018). *Impact of paternal deployment to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and paternal post-traumatic stress disorder on the children of military fathers*. The British Journal of Psychiatry 2018; 212: 347-355.
5. Children's Commissioner (2018). Kin and Country: *Growing up as an Armed Forces Child*. Available at **www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/kin-and-country-growing-up-as-an-armed-forces-child/** Accessed 28 September 2018.
6. Ofsted (2011). Children in Service families. Available online at **www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-in-service-families** Accessed 28 September 2018.
7. NHS Digital (2018). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS]*. Available at **www.digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017** Accessed 27 November 2018.
8. Vestal Logan K (1987). *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment*. Proceedings Magazine, February 1987 Vol. 113/2/1,008.
9. Baumrind D (1967). *Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior*. Genetic Psychology Monographs, 75(1), 43-88.
10. Maccoby EE and Martin JA (1983). *Socialization in the context of the family: Parent–child interaction*. In P Mussen and EM Hetherington, editors, Handbook of Child Psychology, volume IV: Socialization, personality, and social development, chapter 1, pages 1-101. New York: Wiley, 4th edition.
11. NHS. 2016. *Five steps to mental well-being*. Available at **www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/** Accessed 25 September 2018.

About the Author

Bridget Nicholson is a former Royal Navy Logistics Officer, teacher, school governor and teacher training tutor. She has worked extensively with young people and families in education and children's services, providing evidence-based parenting and behaviour support in schools and family settings. She is a Clore Social Leadership Fellow.

You can contact her at the NFF via our website **www.nff.org.uk**

or follow her on Twitter **@BridgetRN_**

YoungMinds

In the production of this resource, we have consulted with YoungMinds, the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health, to ensure that it reflects current effective practice and thinking.

www.youngminds.org.uk

For more information and advice

Visit our website **www.nff.org.uk**
Email us **contactus@nff.org.uk**
Call us on **023 9265 4374**

Naval Families
FEDERATION

Rooms 1 & 2
Building 25
HMS Excellent
Portsmouth
Hampshire
PO2 8ER

Design by i-i-design.com