

NRFC Spotlight

Deployment Tips for Dads in the Military: Part Three¹

Before You Deploy: Prepare Yourself — and Your Family

Between the avalanche of emotions and behaviors experienced by every family member and the stress of preparing for deployment, don't be surprised if you feel completely overwhelmed. Planning proactively and putting the right systems in place before you leave will have a positive impact on how you and your family manage the long weeks and months while you are deployed.

Taking Care of Number One

Call it the “flight attendant school of parenting.” If there's ever an emergency on an airplane and the oxygen masks drop from the overhead compartments, you would know to put yours on before you help your kids, right? The same logic applies here. If you aren't feeling relatively in control of the situation, you cannot be an effective father, husband, or coparent. You need ample time to process the journey that's about to unfold and focus on everything you must get done before you leave. To do all of this well, it's vital to take a little “me time.”

Ideas for “Me Time”

- Crack open a new book. The topic of the book doesn't matter, as long as you enjoy reading it.
 - Look into Operation Paperback (<https://www.operationpaperback.org/>), a non-profit organization that collects gently-used books and sends them to American troops overseas, as well as veterans and military families here at home. You can sign up to receive books or send books that you've read to another service member.
 - Read about child development. Your kids, no matter how old they are now, will do some growing up while you're away. Fortunately, children's development happens at a fairly predictable pace, and learning what to expect at various ages and stages helps ensure your expectations are realistic. (There's nothing worse than coming home to a two-year-old you haven't seen in a year and feeling disappointed that they are still not ready to catch a fly ball.)
- Sweat a little (or a lot). Exercise is one of the best stress relievers ever invented. It has many other benefits, such as:
 - Helping with weight management.
 - Reducing the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.
 - Improving concentration and productivity at work.
 - Boosting mood—which can come in handy during tense times at home.

¹ This is the third in a series of six National Responsible Father Clearinghouse Spotlights, which provide tips for dads on deployment. The series is authored by Armin Brott, a former Marine, fatherhood author (Ask Mr. Dad), and host of the radio show Positive Parenting for Military Families with assistance from Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated).

- Engaging in exercise can do double duty as quality time with family members. But be sure to allow yourself some solo workouts too.
- Get back to nature. Take advantage of activities you find relaxing, whether it's hunting, fishing, camping, shooting the rapids in a raft, or just going for a long hike. This can give you some peaceful, meditative, alone time to unwind, relax, and think without interruption, or it can be another opportunity to spend quality time with your family.
- Look at old photos. You can tell your family you're looking for pictures of yourself that they can place around the house (and you might very well be telling the truth). Reminiscing on old times and favorite memories just feels good.
- Talk to someone outside your immediate family. This could be a chaplain, therapist, good friend, or anyone you feel comfortable talking to.
- Pay close attention to your mood. Do you feel depressed about the deployment or worried you won't be able to handle it? Is your mood having a negative impact on your behavior? If so, make an appointment to talk with your unit commander and seek counseling.
 - Your mood and behavior have a huge impact on the rest of the family, and if they see you depressed or acting in unhealthy ways, they may begin feeling worse than they already do.
 - Mood changes can also lead to you becoming distracted, which has the potential to jeopardize the mission and the life of your military buddies.

BOX

Keeping Romantic Relationships Strong

- Go on a date.
 - Reminisce about your happiest days together— e.g., your first date, your honeymoon, the birth of your children, a special vacation, buying your first home.
 - Remind each other why you're still together.
 - Talk about the future and what you'll do as a couple and as a family when you get back home.
- Enjoy some routine activities together.
 - Go shopping.
 - Take a walk or a bike ride.

Staying Connected and Involved: Laying the Groundwork Before You Leave

Like you, your coparent and children will have many mixed emotions, and may not be handling your impending departure well. Honest, open communication during this time may not always be easy, but it's essential to devote time to talking and making plans for keeping your relationship and family strong.

- Take care of business. Block off a couple hours to talk through key details with your coparent.
 - Give them as much time as they need to share concerns and ask questions.
 - Work together to draft a budget that shows how much money is coming in from all sources and how much gets spent. Make sure that they will have enough

money (including your pay allotments and bonuses) to meet the day-to-day expenses of running the house.

- Review the powers of attorney and lists of emergency contacts for every contingency you can think of.
- Talk about the practical side of parenting while you are away.
 - Will your coparent be able to juggle everything on their own? Will they have a support system if they need help getting the kids to and from school and any sports or other extracurricular activities?
 - Do you have children with special needs? If so, will your coparent need additional support?
 - How will they ensure that general family rules and behavior expectations are followed while your away?
 - As you discuss your family's needs, set some priorities and agree on what's most important for your coparent to focus on while you are away.
- Check into your communications options.
 - Will you have access to computers, the internet/social media, e-mail, or video conferencing?
 - Does your unit have a website that's updated regularly for family members back home?
 - Will you be able to send and receive mail and packages on a regular basis?
 - Will you be able to use your cell phone to make and receive calls or for texting?
 - How frequently will you be able to be in touch with the family? Is there a way for family members to reach you if there's an emergency?
 - If possible, get a Zoom account. It's free (with restrictions) and makes video chats very easy.
- Go shopping.
 - Pick up paper and envelopes for writing letters home.
 - If you buy a unique color or pattern, your kids will know even before they open the envelope that it's from you.
 - Purchase a couple of international prepaid phone cards.
 - Buy a video recorder, a voice recorder, and/or a computer webcam. That way when the internet is up, you can video chat with the folks back home.
 - Even if you can't set up a chat, you may be able to send and receive audio and video clips on your phone.
- Make plans for milestones you'll miss. Chances are you're going to miss some birthdays, special anniversaries, Mother's Day, the holidays, and other significant family occasions.
 - Arrange for flowers or gifts to be delivered via local florists or vendors or from internet resources such as [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
- Set up a family blog.
 - The blog doesn't have to be fancy. Its purpose is simply to keep everyone in the family connected with a platform they can easily log into to post pictures, thoughts, audio or video clips, wild declarations of love, or whatever they want to communicate.

- You can do this for little or no money through services such as WordPress (<https://wordpress.com>) and Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>).

RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

Brott, Armin A. (2009). The military father: A hands-on guide for deployed dads. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/military-father-hands-guide-deployed-dads>

National Military Family Association
<https://www.militaryfamily.org/>

Family Support Resources

Almost every military unit, whether active duty or Reserve, has its own family support network. Depending on your branch of service, your wife or coparent should be able to obtain information and support from one or more of the following:

- Army Community Services
<https://www.armymwr.com/programs-and-services/personal-assistance>
- Navy Fleet and Family Support Center
https://www.cnic.navy.mil/ffr/family_readiness/fleet_and_family_support_program.html/
- Marine Corps Community Services
 - <https://usmc-mccs.org/>
 - <https://www.nmcrs.org/>
- Airforce Key Spouse program
<https://www.afpc.af.mil/Airman-and-Family/Key-Spouse-Program/www.airforcesmallbiz.af.mil/>
- Airman and Family Readiness Center
<https://www.myairforcebenefits.us.af.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Deployment-and-Mobilization-Support>
 - Each Air Force base also has its own Airman and Family Readiness Center and website
- Military OneSource
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil>