

# Tips for Military Families

## Article 1: Supporting Your Child with Mental Health Needs

Military families have unique needs when a parent is deployed or is returning from active duty, especially if they have a child already struggling with mental health needs. For this child, the stress of an absent parent may result in increased emotional or behavioral issues. Your family can often ease the difficult transitions of military life and help your child adjust, however, if you know what to look for and what to do.

### What should parents look for?

Children or teens struggling with mental health needs may experience an increase in symptoms as a result of the stress they are feeling about their parent in the military. These symptoms may include:

- Loss of sleep
- Anxiety-related behaviors (grinding teeth, etc.)
- Physical problems (headaches, stomachaches)
- Aggressive and risk-taking behavior such as staying out past curfew or leaving home without reporting a destination
- Self-inflicted injuries such as not eating or picking at oneself

A parent returning from active duty may also trigger an increase in symptoms as their child tries to readjust to the absentee parent and his or her role in the family. It is helpful if children can understand the source of their behaviors and have support to help them through this difficult time.

### What can parents do?

Families members adapt more easily if they are prepared to deal with deployment and return and feel connected and supported by their social network. If the spouse who is home has a positive attitude and seeks support and help, a child will feel less stress and there will be less of a psychological impact during deployment and return.

Here are some things you can do to help your child through this adjustment:

**Develop a plan** for constant communication between your child and the absent parent. Check in with how they are feeling about the plan and ask if it is working.

**Develop a plan** for constant communication between you and your child. Check in with how your child is feeling.

**Keep a consistent, normal lifestyle.** Don't change rules or expectations.

**Watch your child** for signs of new behavior or escalated behaviors that seem to be unprovoked or unusual.

**Visit your child's doctor** for a screening to detect any mental health or functional concerns. If your child already has a mental health diagnosis, talk with the doctor about any concerns you are seeing and ask for help.

**Meet with your child's teacher(s)** to talk about the deployment or return and suggest strategies to address any fears or behaviors that might come up.

### Ask for help at school

If your child is acting out in school, meet to discuss some positive ways to address the situation. Ask teachers to keep data on how effective those positive interventions are. Follow up with regular check-ins.

**Validate** the feelings of your older children and help your younger children "name" how they are feeling.

**Don't feel guilty** about how you feel. Abandonment, anger, and fear are normal reactions to being left behind or adjusting to the return of a deployed spouse.

**Find support for yourself.** Parenting is hard work, and even more difficult when your spouse is absent and possibly in an unsafe setting. You can't take care of your children without taking care of yourself first.

If you would like more information about helping your child with a mental health disorder in the school setting, please contact the Minnesota Statewide Family Network.

**Minnesota Statewide Family Network (MSFN)**  
8161 Normandale Blvd.  
Minneapolis, MN 55437  
952.838.9000 Voice  
952.838.0199 Fax  
855.750.1360 Toll free  
info@minnesotastatewidefamilynetwork.org

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## Resources

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Finding support and help for your child with a mental health need is especially important during times of stress. The resources listed here can help your family and your child with mental health needs as you learn to cope with the unique stress of military life.

### Resources through the Military

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Beyond the Yellow Ribbon (National Guard)  
[www.BeyondTheYellowRibbon.org](http://www.BeyondTheYellowRibbon.org)

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)  
[www.militaryinstallations.dod.mil](http://www.militaryinstallations.dod.mil)

#### Military Chaplain

Each base has a Military Chaplain who can provide support and resources for families.

National Military Family Association  
[www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)

OneSource (1-800-342-9647)  
[www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

State-based National Guard Centers  
[www.ng.mil](http://www.ng.mil) (click “Resources”)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Veterans Homepage  
[www.samhsa.gov/vets](http://www.samhsa.gov/vets)

U.S. Department of Defense Military Health System Mental Health Homepage  
[www.health.mil/Themes/Mental\\_Health.aspx](http://www.health.mil/Themes/Mental_Health.aspx)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
[www.mentalhealth.va.gov/returningservicevets.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/returningservicevets.asp)

The Yellow Ribbon Program (National Guard)  
[www.yellowribbon.mil](http://www.yellowribbon.mil)

## Nonmilitary Resources

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American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Military Families Resource Center  
[www.aacap.org/cs/MilitaryFamilies.ResourceCenter](http://www.aacap.org/cs/MilitaryFamilies.ResourceCenter)

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Military Youth Deployment Support Website:  
[www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/index.html](http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/index.html)

Minnesota Statewide Family Network (MSFN)  
[www.MinnesotaStatewideFamilyNetwork.org](http://www.MinnesotaStatewideFamilyNetwork.org)

This federally funded, nonprofit, parent-directed organization has a mission to expand opportunities and enhance the lives of children and youth with mental health needs and their families. Through individual advocacy, educational workshops, printed resources and a website, MSFN can help you meet your child’s needs..

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

A grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness.

PACER Center’s Project for Parents of Children with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders  
[www.PACER.org/ebd](http://www.PACER.org/ebd)

Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP)  
[www.stompproject.org](http://www.stompproject.org)

This federally funded Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center assists military families who have children with special education or health needs. It provides information and training about laws, regulations, and resources for military families of children with disabilities, connects families to other families, and helps parents and professionals develop community education and support.