

A DOZEN LESSONS LEARNED

FROM THE PARENTING AT A CHALLENGING TIME PROGRAM

1. **Begin by telling your child about the upcoming deployment.** Decide together with your spouse how you want to describe the separation, what you can share about what you will be doing during this time and what the ways are that you plan to stay connected during deployment. You may want to share with your child the reasons you chose to serve. Let your child know that he or she is loved and that you are serving to help protect your family, not because you want to be away from them.
2. **The worst way for a child to hear difficult news is to overhear it.** News learned by accident is often confusing and inaccurate. Keep the lines of communication open by letting your child know what is happening and what to expect, straight from you. Direct communication lets your child know he or she is important.
3. **Welcome all of your child's questions warmly.** Let your child know you are interested in questions about any topic. Be mindful of the settings in which your child is more likely to talk with you, such as in the car, at the kitchen table while you cook, or at bedtime. Try to be available at those times to make it easier for your child to share what is on his mind.
4. **Try to tease out the "real" question your child wants to ask.** Ask your child to tell you what he was wondering about, or if there is something else she wants to know. You may find that there is a specific concern or worry that is the "real" question. Many times this specific worry can be more easily addressed than the initial question asked.
5. **Not all questions require immediate or detailed answers.** It's all right to say, "That's a good question. I'll need to think about it/discuss it with my [spouse, friend, minister or other family member] and get back to you."

6. **Respect your child's wish to not talk.** Do share basic information, as well as anything that may directly affect your child, in order to avoid confusion and surprises. Check in with your child from time to time and ask if he is hearing too much, too little, or the right amount about the deployment or other changes at home.
7. **Don't let your child worry alone.** Encourage your child to share her worries with you. Sometimes people outside the family say unhelpful things with the kindest intentions. Ask your child to share with you what others may have said about war in general, or about your family's situation in particular. Tell your child how varied military and family experiences can be and how someone else's experience may not be the same as yours.
8. **Keep the channels of communication open with key caregivers.** This includes grandparents, teachers, babysitters, coaches, and the parents of close friends. Ask your child to help you identify who the key point-people should be. By keeping them in the communication loop, you make it easier for these caring adults to provide the appropriate emotional support and stable routine your child needs pre deployment, during times away and during reintegration.
9. **Try to maintain your child's usual schedule.** To help keep the routine as normal as possible, assign a point-person for each child. Post schedules, make lists, and use calendars to help your child and caregivers know what each day holds. Talk with each child's teacher and let your children know who they can go to if they have a hard time at school.
10. **Carve out protected family time.** Turn off the telephone and ask your friends and extended family not to visit at these times. Designate time when your child has your full attention without distractions. Use these moments to check in on the specific details of your child's day. Listen carefully to hear his or her successes, frustrations, or concerns about the future.

11. **Create special family time in preparation for the deployment.** Taking photographs, making videos, and creating shared memories helps a child cope with the separation of a parent during deployment. Explore new ways to communicate across the distance such as special websites and web based telephone services.
12. **Take care of yourself.** Parents need to be mindful of their own well-being and its impact on their children. Be sure you get the help you need to feel confident. It is normal to feel worried, but if you are overwhelmed, turn to your support network of family members, friends, clergy and others who can help you with your emotional health.