



Military Life

Moving and Deployment

Military life presents some unique challenges. Military families and families working for the military relocate a lot. In addition, families have been experiencing longer and more frequent deployments since 9/11. During this time, children face difficult issues, including transfers in and out of schools, leaving friends and family, while often dealing with emotions about a parent who is deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Moving is a hard reality of military life. As a result, families find themselves adjusting their lifestyle to accommodate these changes. Relocating and deployments can put stress on any family, but having a child with autism complicates matters even more. The needs of military families are similar to any other family living with autism — things like teaching their child social skills and supporting their children to become as independent as possible. However, military families have to find local services and supports with each new move. And when a family member is deployed, the parent left behind has to manage all of the parenting duties on their own.

Supports available through the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

There is help with programs such as the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). EFMP assists families by addressing the family's special needs. This includes any special medical, mental health, developmental or educational needs. However, resources in the local community are also essential in helping military families transition into new communities. Information and insights regarding the best doctors, schools, teachers, grants, camps, recreation programs, etc. are best shared through word of mouth by members of the community who utilize those resources. Local community support groups are a great way to connect with other families. To find support groups in Maryland, visit our provider database and choose Provider Type: Support Groups.

Changing schools and special education support

For most children, moving and transferring to new schools is emotionally difficult. For children with autism, transferring is even more complicated because the child may receive special education and community support services. Military families who move from installation to installation struggle to get consistent support for their children. If a child does not receive an adequate education, the family will face the consequences for years to come. As families learn the system and interact with professionals, they must remember that they are the expert on their child and that no one else has a greater knowledge or interest in their child.

In Maryland, each county's public school system houses a Partners for Success Center. The goal of these Centers is the development of skills parents and professionals need to work together as equal partners in the educational decision making process. Partners for Success serves students age 3-21. Another Special Education

resource is MSDE's (Maryland State Department of Education) Family Support Services. Both of these offices can be located in our provider database under County Public School Systems.

Prepare yourself and your child for deployment

Communicating your needs and working with the command is extremely important and will give you the confidence to deploy without fear. Engage early with the military support community such as Army Community Support (ACS) to help you as you prepare to deploy.

Before leaving for deployment, take lots of pictures and video of you *with* your child so he will have constant visual reminders of you. (Remember, most of our kids are visual thinkers.)

Talk with your child about how things will be different while you are gone. Social stories are a good preparation tool for our kids in many situations. Allow her to spend time with the caregivers she will be with while she still has opportunities to come home to you and share her concerns about staying with someone else. Let her know you are listening and take each concern seriously, even if to you some of them may seem trivial.

In children, it is common for fear and depression to be expressed as anger and aggression. If you notice this, talk with a psychologist. If this goes unaddressed, these behaviors may worsen while you are gone.

Prepare your child's caregiver for deployment

Deployment is extremely hard on the child as well as the parent/parents and spouse. Pre-deployment can last up to a year with long hours of preparation and training. Single parents in the military have the added stress of needing to designate long and local short term care providers for times of deployment. Often, grandparents or other family members become the long term care providers. The child will usually go and live with this caregiver during deployment, creating a difficult transition for a child with autism. The long term care provider may not have the knowledge of how to cope with the challenges of autism, schools and IEPs, and other services your child needs. Set aside as much time as you can to train the caregiver in your child's routines, and introduce them to your child's doctors and specialists. Encourage the caregiver to connect with local support groups. To assist the caregiver with school matters, you may want to connect them with your school system's Partners for Success Center.

Communication and support during deployment

Communication throughout the deployment is essential and possible with the internet, phone banks, and old fashion letter writing.

Communication will give the long care term provider or spouse the necessary support during tough times when they want to pull their hair out. It is also essential to find a support group that will help when needed. Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) and other military support groups can really make an enormous difference especially when a spouse doesn't have any family in the area. Counseling is available by military chaplains for families and soldiers especially during the predeployment and redeployment phase. Finding a babysitter is a must because there will always be times the caregiver

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will need to take care of business such as doctor appointments, car repairs, or just rest since deployment can be both physically and emotionally draining. To find a respite care provider, visit our provider database and choose Provider Type: Respite Care.

Coming home from deployment doesn't mean it's all over

Many people think after deployment is over that life just goes back to normal, but there is usually a long adjustment period for the entire family. "James didn't even know me when I returned from my last deployment in Oct 2006. That really hurts when your child is nervous and afraid of you when you want to hug and love them so bad," remembered Major Breck Tarr. Even if you have left visual reminders of your life together, it will still take time for your child to adjust to the change in the actual physical family dynamics.

We know how critical routines and predictability can be for some of our kids. Be aware that while you were away, your child's routine may have changed. Before you come home, ask your child's other parent or caregiver about routines, rules and rituals that your child will be expecting you to adhere to.

If adjustment feels overwhelming for you, your child, or other members of the family, seek the help of a counselor or therapist.

For their contributions to this article, we gratefully offer special thanks to:

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