

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH DEPLOYMENT: Understanding Age-Related Reactions

Deployment can challenge a child's essential needs like safety, security and consistency. Age significantly influences their reaction to deployment.

INFANTS & TODDLERS

They may not understand what is going on, but even at their young age, infants and toddlers feel stress too. Changes in routine, lack of attention and missing their loved one can upset them. They may also pick up on adult emotions but struggle to communicate their feelings effectively. Common reactions in this age group include increased clinginess and difficulty comforting, fear of separation from loved ones, aggressive behavior, changes in eating or sleeping, crying and whining.

PRESCHOOLERS

Preschoolers won't fully grasp what's happening, leading to frustration and confusion. What they see and hear from adult conversations can add to their confusion. They may need reassurance that it's not their fault that their loved one is leaving and will worry about their safety. The separation may feel longer for them. Common reactions among preschoolers include reverting to younger behaviors, emotional outbursts, fear of separation, changes in eating or sleeping patterns and increased clinginess.

SCHOOL-AGE

School-age children can better understand deployment-related issues but may lack coping skills. They may feel overwhelmed by the absence of their loved one and changes in the household dynamic. They may want to help by not bothering you with their problems or taking on too much, leading to frustration. Common reactions observed among school-age children include acting out and other attention seeking behaviors, experiencing problems at school, withdrawal, fear of separation, reverting to younger behaviors and changes in eating or sleeping patterns.

ADOLESCENTS

Adolescence is already a stressful time for some, and with a loved one away, older children may feel the need to mature quickly and take on more responsibilities. While they may seem mature, teens lack adult experience and may struggle with the situation, their new role in the family and other typical teen issues. Common reactions among adolescents include experiencing problems at school and engaging in increased risk-taking behavior, emotional withdrawal coupled with heightened focus on peers, changes in eating or sleeping patterns and mood swings.