

# Making sense of the Emotional Cycle of Deployment for Children

A 'pull-out and keep' resource for parents, carers and schools

*Deployment can be an emotional experience for all the family.*

*Understanding the stages and feelings involved can help parents, carers and schools to support children and young people.*

In the last edition of Homeport, we looked at the Emotional Cycle of Deployment model. In this article, we consider how this model might help us to understand children's behaviour, and at some strategies that can help children at different stages.

## **Some general thoughts for the person who is going to be the primary caregiver for children during a deployment:**

- You are on. Obviously you will be only too aware of this. Even if you feel like sticking a couple of pencils up your nose and saying, 'Wibble', you have to find a way to show your children that you have got a handle on the situation. If you are really not okay, and your mental health is suffering, please reach out to someone who can help you – your GP would be a good start. How you manage your own feelings will affect how children deal with theirs.
  - Build your support network. Easier said than done if you have recently moved, or your friends and family are a long distance away, but you are going to need other humans who understand

your situation. They are out there, and they need you too.

- Children generally thrive on consistency. Maintaining some consistent routines and boundaries is helpful for everyone.
- Make some plans – things to do at weekends and things to look forward to. Try not to put everything on hold.
- Try not to fixate on deployment as 'the enemy'. It can be tempting to start looking at every aspect of your child's behaviour through a 'deployment lens' and to think that all challenges are due to uncertainty around deployment and the other parent's absence or presence. While the deployment cycle will have an impact, some challenges are inevitable for all children and are a normal part of child development. There will be times when deployment is clearly an influential factor in your child's behaviour, and other times when you are not sure. Either way, you can find positive ways to respond. Not all the effects of deployment on children are negative – several studies show that children may become more resilient, resourceful and self-starting.
- Being the main adult in your children's life is a real opportunity to invest in your relationship with them, and to create bonds that last a lifetime. Armed Forces families often place a high value on family life and make conscious choices to support their family relationships, which is a significant strength.



Below is a summary of some of the feelings and behaviours that are common for children and young people during different stages of the deployment cycle. Not all children will experience deployment in the same way, and some children do move through the process relatively smoothly. Children can be very resilient and take things in their stride. Nevertheless they are likely to be dealing with some complicated and strong feelings, and will need help to navigate these. You might find it helpful to share this information with your child's school or other caregivers. Many of the ideas and strategies here come from parents who have been through deployments themselves. This is not an exhaustive list – all children and young people are different and you may find other strategies that help. Do get in touch with us and let us know your ideas – we always love to hear from you!

# 1: Anticipation of Loss – 4-6 weeks before deployment

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b> Younger children may not understand what is going on but may sense increased tension.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b> Shock, denial, worry, sadness. Unexpressed anger, restlessness, resentment. Confusion. Children may dip in and out of negative feelings and forget all about the impending changes for periods of time.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b> Older children and teens may feel pressure to make the most of the time, a sense of obligation, and guilt at negative thoughts. There may be worry about caring for the remaining parent or about having additional responsibilities. They may be concerned about whether they will be able to continue with current activities and hobbies. They may worry about the serving person's safety, or what will happen if an emergency happens.</p>	<p>Children may find it difficult to talk about their feelings because they are not quite sure about their own emotions – it is a confusing time!</p> <p><b>Pre-schoolers</b> Younger children will often carry on as usual as they cannot anticipate the changes, although changes in behaviour may result from their sense that something significant is in the air.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b> Testing rules and boundaries, outbursts of anger, low-level 'whinging', clinginess, regression to behaviours they had outgrown.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b> All of the above, often withdrawal into own space in room or online. Unexpected tears over small things. Spending more time with peers, acting cool and 'not bothered'. Challenging authority and testing the rules.</p>	<p>Listen to your child, make opportunities for them to talk and ask questions. Answer their concerns honestly and in an age-appropriate way. Try not to overburden them with your feelings but be clear that the serving person would like to stay with them. Talk about how well prepared the serving person is, how their team trains and works together to keep each other safe. Offer reassurance that their feelings are normal. Be calm. Explain that the serving person is going and that they are coming back. Talk about where the serving person is going and what they will do. Find out information about it together. Where possible, visit the ship, or at least show pictures of where the parent will sleep. Get prepared – perhaps record a Storybook Waves story and obtain the 'When a special person goes away workbook' from Royal Navy &amp; Royal Marines Welfare. Some families create a 'deployment wall' with a map, photos and special information about the serving person. You can connect the serving person's location with the location of the child with a string.</p> <p>With older children/teens who may be aware of potential risks, be honest but also try to keep things in perspective. You may want to explain the emotional cycle of deployment, and reassure them that their feelings are valid and normal. Keep them occupied and encourage responsibility for age-appropriate household tasks. Encourage outlets such as sports and physical activity. Let teenagers know about what arrangements you have in place in case of an emergency, and who else they can go to for support.</p>

# 2: Detachment and Withdrawal

## - last days before departure

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Sadness.</p> <p>Worry.</p> <p>Anxiety.</p> <p>Emotional detachment.</p> <p>Withdrawal.</p> <p>Guilt.</p> <p>Responsibility for the serving person leaving – may feel at fault as the situation is hard to understand.</p> <p>Impatience to 'get it over with'.</p> <p>Frustration (particularly if departure is delayed).</p>	<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b></p> <p>Many carry on as usual. They may express their feelings through increased tantrums, being clingy, or showing swings between moods of great dependence and independence. Their sleep may be disturbed (although of course this is common anyway!). Toddlers and pre-schoolers tend to live in the moment and respond to what is happening around them now – they may have difficulty comprehending that a parent is leaving while they are still there.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b></p> <p>Tearfulness and sensitivity. Angry outbursts, sometimes followed by sad or clingy behaviour.</p> <p>Wanting attention and physical contact.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b></p> <p>Lashing out, arguing.</p> <p>Being unwilling to talk about their worries.</p> <p>Withdrawal and trying to avoid feelings.</p> <p>Wanting to be out with their mates.</p> <p>Curiosity and need for information.</p> <p>Changes in mood, eating and sleeping patterns.</p>	<p>Let school and other caregivers know about the deployment.</p> <p>Keep to your usual family routines right up to the day of departure. Consider organising something special, like a family party or outing to look back on.</p> <p>Let children help the serving person pack if they want to. Help them to pack a photo of themselves somewhere safe.</p> <p>Make plans for how you will stay in contact.</p> <p>Plan for what will happen during special occasions while the serving person is away – write in birthday cards or choose gifts.</p> <p>Spend time with each child individually.</p> <p>Exchange 'comfort items', for instance a soft toy or a personal memento, an item the child has made.</p> <p>Talk about ways your children have coped with other difficult situations in the past.</p> <p>Acknowledge and name feelings honestly and openly.</p> <p>Avoid placing inappropriate responsibility on male children by telling them that they are 'the man of the house' while the serving person is away.</p> <p>Keep goodbyes short.</p>



# 3: Emotional Disorganisation – early days after departure

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Shock.</p> <p>Relief (may be followed with guilt at feeling relieved).</p> <p>Numbness.</p> <p>Pain.</p> <p>Loneliness.</p> <p>Anxiety.</p> <p>Sense of anti-climax.</p> <p>Sense of disruption.</p> <p>Confusion - especially toddlers and pre-schoolers who have a limited ability to understand what has happened.</p> <p>Sense of being overwhelmed.</p>	<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b></p> <p>Clinging to people or favourite toy or blanket.</p> <p>Unexplained crying or tearfulness.</p> <p>Choosing adults over same-age play mates.</p> <p>Hitting, biting people or things.</p> <p>Shrinking away from people or becoming very quiet.</p> <p>Sleep difficulties or disturbances (waking, bad dreams).</p> <p>Eating difficulties or change in eating patterns.</p> <p>Fear of new people or situations.</p> <p>Keeping primary care giver in view.</p> <p>Regression to behaviours that had finished (such as bed-wetting, wanting to share a bed, thumb-sucking).</p> <p><b>School-age children</b></p> <p>Any of the signs listed above, and:</p> <p>A rise in complaints about stomach aches, headaches, or other illnesses.</p> <p>More sensitive than usual.</p> <p>Problems at school (does not want to go, not paying attention, general complaining).</p> <p>Anger toward at-home parent.</p> <p>Testing the limits to see if the rules are the same.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b></p> <p>Signs listed above, and:</p> <p>Getting into trouble at school, at home and outside.</p> <p>Low self-esteem and self-criticism.</p> <p>Misdirected anger (disproportionate anger over small things; directed at siblings/parent).</p> <p>Sudden or unusual school problems.</p> <p>Drop in performance in school.</p> <p>Loss of interest in usual interests and hobbies.</p>	<p>Take proper care of yourself and try to maintain healthy habits like eating a balanced diet and getting some exercise.</p> <p>Try to stick to normal routines – for example regular meal and bedtimes.</p> <p>Remain consistent with your household rules; this helps children to feel secure.</p> <p>Give extra support and attention. Talk openly and honestly about separation and what they miss. Although this may be painful, it will help the subsequent reunion to remember the person who is absent.</p> <p>Set up a visual countdown calendar.</p> <p>Talk with school and other caregivers about what is happening.</p> <p>Try to remain calm and continue to communicate with your child if behaviour becomes challenging – early deployment difficulties usually subside with time.</p> <p>Put words to their feelings – ‘I can see you are feeling very angry/sad/worried’.</p> <p>Be prepared for some questions about death (‘Will mummy/daddy kill people or be shot?’), which it is necessary to calmly and honestly address, even if you are worried about the same thing.</p> <p>With older children and teenagers who may try to keep up a brave face, try to be available to talk about concerns even if it appears that they do not want to. Try to maintain rules and boundaries that existed prior to the deployment. Reach out to your adult support network to avoid over-burdening teenagers who may feel responsible for caring for you.</p> <p>Ease off on articulating expectations of attainment/high marks at school. Be compassionate but firm about attendance and homework.</p>

# 4: Recovery and Stabilisation –

## 2nd month after departure onwards

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Things start to feel normal and settle into a routine.</p> <p>Increased confidence.</p> <p>Lift in mood – more positive, creative and funny.</p> <p>Pride in ability to help with household jobs.</p> <p>News reports may cause anxiety.</p> <p>Sense of vulnerability and irrational fears about safety may persist.</p>	<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b></p> <p>Regressive behaviours settling down. Settling into a routine. Improvements in sleep patterns. Reduction in tantrums.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b></p> <p>Regressive behaviours settling down and resolving. Improvement in sleep patterns. Ability to manage feelings improves. Learning new skills and taking on new responsibilities.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b></p> <p>Cultivating friendships and sources of support. Taking on new responsibilities in the home. Increasing independence and confidence. Wanting their views to be taken into consideration and a more 'adult' role. Testing rules and boundaries (the job of all teenagers!). Wanting increased freedom. Trying out a new image.</p>	<p>Keep a scrapbook or memory box of things you are doing whilst the serving person is away, so that children can have a record to share with the returning parent.</p> <p>Try to filter the amount and type of news from operational areas. This is more of a challenge with teens – open a discussion about things that they may have read or seen on YouTube. Provide opportunities to talk about the absent parent and be sensitive to when children would prefer not to talk.</p> <p>Model non-fearful behaviour.</p> <p>Provide predictable separation and reunion routines for drop-offs and pick-ups – be there when you say you will.</p> <p>Make plans for weekends and holidays.</p> <p>Seek support from a GP, health visitor or school nurse about any behaviours that are unresolved and continuing to cause concern (such as bedwetting).</p> <p>With teenagers – maintain rules and boundaries, but recognise that changes will occur and re-negotiation will take place during the deployment.</p> <p>Deployed parent – make small and consistent efforts to stay in touch (Submariners and those on remote ops – you might need to be very creative and plan ahead to leave notes for special occasions and surprises before you go. Perhaps a number of special books to read together or a hidden treasure hunt). When sending postcards, mark an 'X' where you stood on the picture. Communicate with each child individually, even if it is brief. Keep a list of things to talk about – ask them about their friends, hobbies, interests. For young children, tangible objects like letters/pictures tend to work better than e-mails or texts.</p>





## 5: Anticipation of Homecoming - 1 to 2 months before return

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Joy and excitement.</p> <p>Apprehension and nervousness (particularly older children and teenagers who may feel that rules will change and newly-won freedoms be lost).</p> <p>Confused and uncertain – small children may have difficulty remembering what it was like to be around their serving parent.</p> <p>Worried about what the absent parent will think about actions they have taken (teenagers).</p> <p>Guilt about negative feelings.</p>	<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b> May not really understand what is happening until the homecoming is imminent. Behaviour may become more erratic as they sense impending changes.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b> Often will carry on much as normal until close to the event. May communicate any worries through unpredictable behaviour.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b> May or may not wish to be involved in preparations for the homecoming. Appearing aloof and not bothered about it. Continuing focus on friendships with peers.</p>	<p>Sending letters from the children to the absent parent, updating them on new skills acquired and things that have changed.</p> <p>If not discussed prior to deployment, agree between the primary care-giver and serving parent how you will navigate the homecoming with regard to extended family members. The serving person should take charge of managing expectations on his/her side of the family. It may be necessary to explain the need for the immediate family unit to have time and space to re-integrate before having extended visits. No one wants their first row to take place in front of their in-laws.</p> <p>Ask children how they would like to prepare – would they like to make a banner or a cake? It doesn't matter if they don't, giving the invitation also invites them to mentally prepare for another change.</p> <p>Explain what will happen. Amid the excitement, try to resist the urge to build up the homecoming into a massive deal - this increases the pressure of expectation of things to be perfect and can add to the stress.</p>

## 6: Renegotiation – early days after homecoming

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Beginning of sense of being back together as a family.</p> <p>Enjoying more warmth, closeness and cuddles.</p> <p>Sense of a loss of freedom and independence – having to be answerable to another parent.</p> <p>Resentment and anger at the separation which could not be expressed at the time to the serving parent.</p> <p>Tension, expectation that everything will be perfect when it may not be.</p> <p>Feeling ‘hemmed in’ – a lot more togetherness and pressure to get along.</p> <p>Unsettled – a sense that things are changing and that renegotiation needs to happen.</p>	<p><b>Pre-schoolers</b></p> <p>Tendency to default to the primary care-giver for cuddles and reassurance.</p> <p>Initial wariness of returning parent.</p> <p><b>School-age children</b></p> <p>Tendency to default to the primary care-giver for decisions.</p> <p>Confusion about which parent to ask for things.</p> <p>Clinginess, shadowing the returning parent.</p> <p>Seeking attention in both positive and less constructive ways.</p> <p>Testing to see if both parents will have a united front – playing one off against the other.</p> <p><b>Teenagers</b></p> <p>Testing boundaries and limits.</p> <p>Clashes over how much time they spend at home.</p> <p>‘Checking out’ or retreating to their bedroom/social media.</p>	<p>Returning parent: take the lead from the parent who has been the primary care-giver on matters of discipline and rules to begin with.</p> <p>Resist the urge to dive straight in with discipline until relationships have been firmly re-established. Allow time for emotional re-connection – if children are a little wary to begin with, this can be upsetting but it will resolve. Spend time with each child individually, doing an activity of the child’s choice. Share their scrapbook or memory box of what has happened during the deployment. Ease in gradually to changes in routines with younger children.</p> <p>Give older children and teenagers a bit of space and allow them to continue with their normal activities. Find out about their interests and use those as a springboard to talk. Ask for their advice about music and technology. Watch their favourite YouTube channel with them.</p> <p>Use time in the car or out for a walk to strike up a conversation – it feels less intimidating to teens than a one-to-one involving eye contact.</p> <p>Recognise that these early days tend to be emotionally challenging, with changes causing friction and clashes – this is normal and is not a reflection on the quality of relationships or an indication of how things will be in the future.</p>

## 7: Reintegration & stabilisation –

4-6 weeks after homecoming (sometimes longer depending on type of deployment/separation)

How children may be feeling:	Common behaviours:	Strategies and practical ideas that may help:
<p>Sense of normality.</p> <p>Learning to be more relaxed and comfortable with each other.</p>	<p>More equal expectations from both care-givers.</p> <p>Understanding and acceptance of rules and boundaries – although older children and teenagers in particular will continue to test these as a normal part of their development.</p>	<p>If differences in parenting styles are making the adjustment challenging, consider undertaking a parenting course together so that you can think about how to get back on the same page.</p> <p>For couples – invest in your own relationship and communication as this is one of the most helpful things you can do for your family. You can access support through Relate for all aspects of couple and family relationships.</p> <p>Continue to spend one-to-one time with each child doing something they enjoy.</p> <p>Think about your family traditions and ways you can strengthen the bonds between you while you are together.</p> <p>Schedule regular family time to have a film night, play games or have a meal together.</p>

# Sources of Support for Parents and Children during Deployment

## Royal Navy & Royal Marines Welfare

Support and information for serving people, their families and friends.

+44(0)23 9272 8777



### Aggies

Helps members of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines maintain the link with their children by recording a bedtime story for them to listen to when a parent is serving away from home.

[www.aggies.org.uk/storybook-waves-2](http://www.aggies.org.uk/storybook-waves-2)



## Children's Education Advisory Service

Provides expert and impartial advice about the education of Service children in the UK and overseas including Continuity of Education Allowance and Eligibility Certificates.

01980 618 244

[dcyp-ceas-enquiries@mod.uk](mailto:dcyp-ceas-enquiries@mod.uk)

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/childrens-education-advisory-service>



### Little Troopers

A registered charity supporting all children with parents serving in the British Armed Forces, Regular or Reserve. Resources, initiatives and events to ease and aid repeated separation periods aiming to keep parent and child connected and bonded even when miles apart.

[www.littletroopers.net](http://www.littletroopers.net)

### Huggable Heroes

Personalised Huggable Heroes, perfect for cuddles when loved ones are not at home.

[www.huggableheroes.co.uk](http://www.huggableheroes.co.uk)



### Relate

Offers counselling services for every type of relationship nationwide, including parenting and help for children and young people. Free support funded by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity.

[www.relate.org.uk/](http://www.relate.org.uk/)

## NSPCC

### NSPCC

Charity championing child protection. Useful resources and guidance for keeping children safe, to give the primary care-giver during deployment confidence in their choices. Their 'Home Alone' guide gives sound advice and useful tips to help parents decide in which situations they may leave their children home alone, and what they need to do to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Their 'Out Alone' guide provides advice and practical tips to parents on judging if a child is ready to be out on their own and how to prepare them for different situations such as walking to and from school by themselves, attending sports or holiday clubs, or going out to play with friends. Go to [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) and search 'home alone' or 'out alone' to download free copies.

## Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

### Gingerbread

Expert advice, practical support and campaigning for single parents.

Helpline: 0808 802 0925

[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

## YOUNGMINDS

### Young Minds

UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. Helpline and information for parents concerned about a child or young person.

Parents' helpline: 0808 802 5544

E-mail: [parents@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:parents@youngminds.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)



family lives

### Family Lives

(formerly Parentline Plus)

Advice and support for parents.

24 hour helpline 0808 800 2222

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

### Military Kids' Club Heroes

(formerly HMS Heroes)

A national support group for the children of Servicemen and women and their relatives. A tri-Service network of after-school clubs, MKC Heroes brings together members of Service families aged between 3 and 18 years old from all over the country.

[www.plymouthcurriculum.swgfl.org.uk/hmsheroes](http://www.plymouthcurriculum.swgfl.org.uk/hmsheroes)