

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



# HOMEFRONT

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF



## Overview:

# TAKING CARE OF YOU = TAKING CARE OF YOUR CHILD

**T**aking care of your baby or toddler is not only about what you say and do but how you are. Are you calm or tense? Can you focus on your child, or are you constantly distracted? Do you have the time and energy to pay attention and be present with your child, to laugh and play with her?

These are important questions for all parents of babies and toddlers. They become even more important when you are coping with the added stressors of military life.

**T**his brochure focuses on how taking care of yourself is one way of taking care of your baby or toddler. Choose an idea or two to support your child, your family, and yourself.

*I used to think it was selfish to think about myself. Then I realized that taking care of me is one of the ways I take care of my kids. There isn't too much free time for me, but even a little can go a long way.*



## WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

To support your child, begin by trying to understand your experiences and feelings.

**M**any parents are so busy caring for their child that they don't take time to physically or emotionally "refuel." Are you one of them? Do you find yourself running on empty? Running out of patience and energy to enjoy your child?

Like many military parents, you may be stationed far from family and friends, but you are not alone, even though you may feel that way at times. Family and friends are still in your life, ready to offer encouragement from a distance. In addition, there are people and services in the military and civilian community to whom you can turn. With some time and research, you can find rich resources ranging from military discounts for family outings to clothing exchanges and supportive counseling services. Here are some strategies to help you find the support you need:

- **Remember, all parents need support.** Parenting is a wonder and joy. It is also an incredibly difficult and demanding job.
- **Be clear: It is OK to ask for help.** As one mom explains, "It takes courage to ask for something you need. Some people think it is a sign of weakness. I think if asking for help is good for my kids, it's a sign of strength."
- **Look for information about services in a variety of places.** As a dad explains, "The more people you talk with, the better your chances of finding what you need."

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### What do you think?

- At what time of day is your child most calm? Content? Engaged? When is he fussiest?
- When are you most calm? Fussiest?
- How do you know when you need a break?
- Who can you call when you need extra support?



- **If the person you are talking to can't help, ask them for the name and number of someone who can.** Eventually you will get to the person who can provide the information or service you need.
- **Don't be shy.** There are people in every community whose job it is to support families. They want to do what they can for you.

## Are You Noticing Any of These Changes in Yourself?

- Sleep difficulties like middle-of-the-night awakenings and nightmares
- Changes in eating habits, such as loss of appetite or overeating
- Irritability, emotional outbursts, and crying
- Resentment and/or anger about the deployment
- Doubts about your ability to cope
- Lack of energy and decreased pleasure in daily living
- The feeling that you have little control over your life
- Anxiety about living without the military family member
- Fear and anxiety about the safety of the active duty family member

These are common responses to challenging times. If they persist or interfere with daily activities, speak with a professional to answer your questions and provide additional support you may need.

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## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

### Supports and services to explore include:

- Personal support of family, friends, and neighbors
- Community services, including community centers, child care programs, resource and referral agencies, houses of worship, Armed Services YMCA, the American Legion, and the USO
- Military support services, including:

Family Life Chaplains and Chapel programs

Family Support Services: Services offered include crisis intervention, financial management, relocation assistance, spouse employment assistance, parenting education, and deployment support programs. Each branch has an organization/position that provides these services.

- Army—Soldier and Family Support Centers and Army Community Services (ACS)
- Navy—Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC)
- Air Force—Airmen and Family Readiness Center (AFRC)
- Marine Corps—Marine and Family Services (M & FS)
- Coast Guard—Work-Life Center, located in each district office

Family Readiness Groups: A peer information and referral system that passes information from the command to the family during deployments. Volunteers are trained to communicate professionally and know available resources. NOTE: You should be sure your family readiness group has up-to-date contact information for you at all times.

- Army—Family Readiness Group (FRG)
- Navy—Ombudsman Program (OP)
- Marine Corps—Key Volunteer Network (KVN) and Lifestyle Insights Networking Knowledge Skills (LINKS)
- Air Force—Key Spouse

Finally, contact Military OneSource by calling Stateside: 1-800-342-9647, Overseas: 1-800-3429-6477, or Overseas Collect: 1-484-530-5908 any time or go to <http://www.militaryonesource.com> for additional information about supports and services on your installation or in your community.

## WHAT IT'S LIKE FOR YOUR CHILD

*Next, try to understand what your child experiences and feels.*

**B**ecause your connection is so deep, your child picks up on your feelings. When you feel cared for, your baby or toddler senses your inner confidence and calm. When you are running on empty, he may notice tension in your voice, your expression, or in your arms when you hold him. It may feel to him as if his foundation is shaky. He may become cranky, clingy, extra quiet, or even angry.

When you take care of yourself, you can be more available physically and emotionally for your child. She will feel safe, secure, happy, and free to explore the wonders of her world because you will have the energy, patience, and time to:

- Settle into your favorite rocking chair for a snuggle
- Talk about what you are seeing and doing together
- Invite your child to participate in daily routines, such as setting the table, making the bed, and sorting the laundry
- Enjoy playing with words and sounds as you sing songs to your baby, and make up silly rhymes with your toddler
- Patiently read the same book for the fifth time
- Walk to the park
- Share in your child's pleasure and excitement about new discoveries and accomplishments
- Play make-believe
- Remain calm as you wipe up spilled juice, explaining that "accidents happen"
- Respond to challenging behavior such as hitting, grabbing, or biting in positive ways that help your child learn self-control



## SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

*Finally, use what you have learned to decide how best to respond.*

Your child depends on you every day. When you have the support you need, you have more to give to your child. You have a bigger supply of energy, patience, delight, joy, laughter, and humor that will help your child feel safe, secure, and loved.

To support your child, take care of yourself. Schedule time for yourself in your family calendar or planner. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Rest, exercise, and try to eat regular, balanced meals.** When you are healthy, your child reaps the benefits.
- **Maintain your daily routine as best you can.** Predictability can be comforting for you—and your child.
- **Shift your thinking when needed:**
  - o Try to appreciate the little things. Enjoying coffee over the morning newspaper, taking a “power walk,” or doing the crossword puzzle, for example, can help recharge your batteries each and every day.
  - o Let go of the guilt. As one mom, balancing work, caring for a toddler, and keeping connections strong with a deployed spouse says, “I don’t feel guilty sitting around on Sundays doing nothing but hanging out with my son. It’s our time for catching our breath and being together.”
- **Stay connected. Keep in close touch with family and friends.** Share your fears and concerns and your pride and joy in your child.
- **Turn off the TV and radio.** You may want to try to limit yourself to one news show a day when your child is asleep. Contact your unit’s spouse support network to receive the



most up-to-date and accurate information about your Service member’s deployment.

- **Have realistic expectations for yourself.** No one has all the answers when it comes to raising a baby or toddler. Every parent at times wishes life had a replay button. Rather than be hard on yourself, see your mistakes as a chance to learn.
- **Give yourself a pat on the back.** As you spend your day running around “doing everything,” such as getting groceries, balancing the checkbook, bringing the car in for an oil change, changing diapers, and singing lullabies, remember to take pride in all you accomplish and let those things yet to be done wait until tomorrow.

*What do you think?*

- What makes you feel happy? Gives you energy? Helps you feel calm?
- What do you wish you had more time to do? How can you make some time for it this week?

- **Finally, remember, caring for yourself doesn't have to be hard on your budget.** If a massage at a local spa will increase your debt and stress, go for an at-home, do-it-yourself pedicure or team up with a friend. If tickets to the professional/college football game in town are too expensive, make some popcorn, order a pizza, and watch the game at home with a friend or two.

### Remember the Wonder of the Everyday

You and your child can find comfort in each other's presence. Your shared joy and sense of connection can help you make it through difficult times. Hang out in your pajamas and play together; peel a banana or an orange, and talk about how it tastes, smells, and feels as you share it. Take a walk to the park and watch for birds and squirrels; take tiny steps then huge giant steps; walk forward then backward. Make a tape of the two of you singing songs, put it in an envelope, and mail it to your deployed family member. Go on a picnic outdoors or in the living room. Run as fast as you can; run as slowly as you can. Snuggle and enjoy reading a favorite book together.

### Resources

MilitaryHOMEFRONT: [www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil](http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil) is the official Department of Defense website for reliable quality of life information designed to help troops and their families, leaders, and service providers.

Military OneSource: [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com) is available 24/7 to connect families with services including car repair, money management, child care, spouse employment, counseling, and relocation. Or call 1-800-342-9647.

ZERO TO THREE: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) offers a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at [www.zerotothree.org/military](http://www.zerotothree.org/military)

### Reference

This brochure is based in part on information and insights from:

Pawl, J. H., & St. John, M. (1998). *How you are is as important as what you do . . . in making a positive difference for infants, toddlers, and their families.* Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

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We especially acknowledge the contribution and leadership of Jane Steinen, Program Specialist (MRZ-3) and Michael Berger, Deputy Branch Head, Family Readiness Branch (MRZ), Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, Personal and Family Readiness Division.



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ZERO TO THREE gratefully acknowledges Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, Personal and Family Readiness Division for making the original edition of this booklet possible.

Published by:



[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 0-943657-96-2

Writer: **Amy Dombro**

Photo credit: **All photos by Allison Silberberg**

Design: **Metze Publication Design**