

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



NEW FAMILIES

NURTURING NEW RELATIONSHIPS





OVERVIEW: IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Your baby is born into a world of relationships. The relationships you build with her and with each other create and shape the environment in which she develops. The influence of these relationships is far more important than that of any toy or activity you may offer—and it begins even before she arrives.

When an expecting mom and dad support each other—and are in caring relationships with family and friends—they begin to create a loving environment for their baby. This makes it easier to handle the changes that pregnancy brings.

Beginning at birth, your baby learns her first lessons about her world and who she is as you dress, bathe, feed, and cuddle her. When you care for her in loving, predictable ways, she learns she is special and that she can trust you to be there for her. Your interactions shape her expectations of future relationships.

When you communicate and support each other as new parents—even if one of you is deployed across the globe or soon will be—you have more to give your baby. Your relationship with each other, and with him, grows stronger.

Just as there is no such thing as a perfect parent, there is no such thing as a perfect relationship, whether between parents or between child and parent. It's a good thing really. Everyday "bumps" in relationships are opportunities to reconnect and get back in sync, which may strengthen your bond.

You may be a mom or dad, an expecting parent, a first-time parent, or you may have years of experience. This brochure focuses on how you can support your baby by building strong and nurturing relationships around and with your baby. Choose an idea or two to support your baby, your family, and yourself.

Am I going to be able to make it through pregnancy again knowing my husband will be away?

It's the help of our military family that is going to get us and our new baby through.

WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

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

The news of a pregnancy and the arrival of a new baby can bring many deep and mixed feelings. There can be tender times filled with a deeper love than you ever knew was possible. There can also be times of worry, fear, and exhaustion.

A new baby means big changes in how you see yourself and a shift in family roles and responsibilities, whether this is your first child or your fifth. If you are an expecting or new mother, you are also dealing with the miraculous and, at times, overwhelming changes in your body. Hormonal shifts can play havoc on your mood and sense of well-being.

As parents in the military, one of the biggest challenges you may face is being apart—or preparing to be apart—during the last months of pregnancy, childbirth, and the first months of your baby's life.

To complicate things you may be living great distances from relatives and friends.

the support you need—from each other and from outside sources. By working together, you can help your baby thrive.

You are both growing and changing. Just as your child will go through different stages of development over the years, so will you. You will discover that your baby is a unique individual, with traits you adore and—let's be realistic—some you could live without. You will learn who you are as a parent and how your childhood experiences shape your expectations, responses, and feelings.

As your baby develops, you will be faced with new decisions. For example: How do I set limits? What do I want to teach my child? What values do I want to share with my child?

Dreaming and planning are a big part of getting ready for and welcoming a new baby into your family. Try to make time to dream together through talking or writing.

WHAT YOUR CHILD MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

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

Your baby is born with curiosity and a drive to explore, understand, and master his environment. He will begin to put together his first pictures of himself, you, and the world around him as he takes in information; first, through his senses, later through language, and eventually through the written word. Although he will follow a predictable path of development, it will happen on his individual timetable.

In the first weeks of your baby's life, you may not be sure what she needs or when she needs it. She doesn't know either. As her nervous system settles during her first weeks, there begins to be a pattern to her crying, eating, sleeping, and waking.

He depends on you for everything at the beginning. Yet he is very much his own person, different from any brothers or sisters, different from anyone in the world. He is born with his own personal style or temperament. For example, he may be slow to warm or very intense. Maybe he is one of those people who usually takes things as they come.

You play a big part in shaping the person she will become. At the same time, her style, personality, interests, and needs shape who you will become as her parent.

Your relationship teaches him about who he is and what he can expect from other people. It helps buffer him from stress. It provides him with a base of security from which to explore, discover, and learn as he rolls to the edge of the blanket, crawls to the other side of a room, and one day runs over to join other kids in the park. Your relationship will be part of him—and you—forever, across the years and the miles.

What do you think?

- What are your dreams for your new baby? For your family?
- How and when can you share your dreams with your spouse?

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

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



Here are some steps you can take to support your new baby

- When you are home together facing deployment,
- During deployment, and
- As you reunite—when dad may be meeting his baby for the first time or getting reacquainted after being apart.

AT HOME TOGETHER BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

Use the time you have together before deployment to take care of each other and prepare for parenthood.

Face the Tough Issues

It's not easy to be expecting a baby when you will soon be separated. As one mom said: "This isn't the way I imagined my pregnancy would be."

Knowing Dad will be in a war zone makes the time you have together more precious. At the same time, it may be harder to feel close. If you can, talk together about your feelings including your fears. As one dad shared: "It was hard for my wife and I to talk about what if I don't come back. But we did. And it was a relief."

Prepare for Your Baby

Here are some things you can do together to prepare:

- **Let your unborn baby know you love her already.** Make a Welcome—We Love You! book for her. Include photos of you getting ready for her or of a place you hope to take her one day. Write her a letter. Make her a tape telling her about all the things you want to share with her. Sing her your favorite songs from your childhood. She'll hear you!

- **Record Dad talking and singing to your new baby to play after the baby is born.** That way, he or she will begin to get to know Dad's voice and feel his love.
- **Take some time to do things you love to do together.** Whether you love to walk together, cook, dance, visit friends—do it.
- **Brainstorm everything that Mom may need.** Everything! Items on your list may include a supply of diapers for the newborn, a camera, a ride to prenatal appointments and to the hospital when labor pains begin, someone to help out at home during the first weeks the baby is home, child care for older siblings, some extra money to have on hand, and so forth. Writing each item down will give you a sense of order.
- **Create a network of ongoing support for Mom—during her pregnancy, labor, and after the baby is born.** You may ask a family member or close friend to be Mom's labor coach and stay with her when she comes home with the new baby. You may want to arrange for a doula, someone specially trained to give information and physical and emotional support to women during pregnancy and labor.
- **Enroll in the New Parent Support Program (NPSP), available on most military installations.** Services differ by service branch and installation, but they may include prenatal classes, hospital visits right after the baby is born, home visits, parenting classes, play groups, and referrals to other resources as needed. To learn more, contact your installation's Family Advocacy Program or Family Support Center.
- **Post important numbers by the phone.** These include your doctor, the place where Mom will give birth, and family and friends who will help out.

- **Help each other be healthy.** Smoking and alcohol can harm your developing baby. They should be avoided. Eat well, drink enough water, exercise, and get enough sleep. Join a support group with other expecting parents.
- **Obtain a medical power of attorney.** This is a person you designate to make medical decisions on Mom's behalf if she isn't able to do so. See your installation's Legal Assistance Office for assistance.

Saying Hello to Your New Baby (Knowing It Will Soon Be Time to Say Goodbye)

You are one of your baby's most important people, and she is precious to you. Holding back or feeling distant are natural responses when you know you will soon be leaving. They protect you from the pain of saying "goodbye." As much as you can, love her and treasure her before you are deployed. Carry her with you in your heart during deployment.



What do you think?

- What are the items on your TO DO list?
- Which of these items can you take care of together before deployment?
- Who can help Mom after deployment?

DURING DEPLOYMENT

Here are some ideas to help you support each other and get your parenting partnership off to a good start. (Note: This section is largely based on an article titled *Dealing with Deployment: Having a Baby When Your Spouse is Deployed*, which you can find on Military OneSource. See Resources for Families.)

Sharing Pregnancy

- **Expect deep and mixed feelings.** Deployment stirs up intense feelings in the best of times. So does pregnancy. You may be feeling frustration, anger, guilt, and resentment about being separated. It's OK. You can have these feelings and still deeply love each other and your new baby.
- **Share what is happening.** Mom might send Dad copies of an ultrasound picture, a recording of the baby's heartbeat, and photos of Mom's growing belly. Dad can call and e-mail regularly and ask for the latest news.
- **Make a box of memories.** Dad may write letters to his baby or take photos of him with his buddies. Mom may include a list of her wishes for the baby, her prenatal appointment slips, and labels or recipes of foods she craved during her pregnancy.
- **Get the information you need from your doctor.** Write down your questions and those of your spouse. Bring the list to each prenatal appointment. Take someone along with you to listen and take notes.

THE BIRTH

If you are a mom:

- **If permitted, and if you wish, have someone record the birth or the moments before and after.** This will be a special tape to watch with your spouse.

- **E-mail a digital photo of your newest family member.** This way, Dad can see his new baby from the beginning and share the photo with friends.
- **Contact the leader of your family readiness group for your spouse's command.** This way, group members may provide valuable support.

For both of you:

- **Have the same picture of both of you nearby.** It will remind you of your love and that you are in this together. Mom can use it as her "focus" point during labor. Dad can hold it to feel close.
- **Stay in touch by phone.** If you can't call during labor and right after the delivery, a family member, friend, or labor coach can call Dad and give him the latest update. Or contact the American Red Cross and ask them to provide the notification if direct phone contact with Dad is not possible.
- **Make a scrapbook of the big day.** Mom, Dad, family members, and friends can share their feelings about the events of this special day.

Finally, **Celebrate!** Mom might send a celebration box with bubble gum cigars, plastic champagne glasses, and candy to a deployed buddy to give to Dad after the baby is born. Dad might arrange with a friend at home to give Mom a bunch of flowers and a card he wrote or tape he made on the big day.

Keeping Connections Strong With Your Baby Across the Miles

If you are a mom:

- **Send Dad a memento of your baby's birth day.** For example, you may want to send your baby's receiving blanket, hospital cap, hospital wrist band, or a copy of birth certificate with your baby's footprint.

For Mom: If You Are Feeling Blue

It's common for new moms to feel out of sorts—sad, anxious. Your hormones are still dancing around. Being a mother is new—or at least being a mom to this baby. Your spouse is deployed. You need and miss his support. You aren't getting enough sleep.

Sometimes these everyday blues can become more serious and you may need help. Knowing what to look for is a way you can take care of yourself and your baby.

If you are feeling down:

- Talk to someone who understands what it's like. Your mom. Friends. Your doctor.
- Get some rest. Ask a family member or friend to babysit so you can nap.
- Focus on your baby—and on you.
- Ask for help if these feelings last more than 2 weeks.

If you feel sad, angry, or irritable; have trouble sleeping; and experience mood swings weeks or months after your baby is born, it may be postpartum depression. If these symptoms don't lessen or go away or if they get in the way of taking care of yourself and your baby, call your doctor. There are treatments that will help.

Finally, call your doctor right away if you feel confused or out of control or have thoughts of hurting yourself or your baby.

- **Make videos and take photos to send to Dad.** In the first months of life, there are many changes, big and small, for Dad to see.
- **Keep a running list of funny, new, and interesting things your baby does by the phone or computer.** Give Dad regular updates.



If you are a dad who is deployed:

No matter how far away you are, or for how long, you can still hold your child—in your mind. Being held in another person’s mind helps a young child feel safe and connected. (It can help us adults feel that way, too.)

You keep your connection strong when you:

- Remember things you did together,
- Carry her picture in your pocket,
- Tell stories about her, and
- Dream about what you will say and do together when you get home.

When you get home, you will build your connection even stronger.

AT HOME TOGETHER WITH YOUR BABY

Homecoming is often a time of deep and mixed feelings, even when there isn’t a new baby in the family. The best way to make your first days and weeks together work for everyone is to have realistic expectations. (For more information, see the brochure *Homecoming*.)

Here are some tips to help make the transition to being together as a family:

- **Remember, it can take time to feel like a parent.** When Dad comes home, he may instantly fall in love with the baby, or he may need some time. He may feel comfortable taking on caregiving responsibilities, or he may feel unsure, even afraid to handle someone so small and precious.
- **Look for all the ways your baby says, “You are special to me.”** For example, how he gazes into your eyes as you feed him, calms down and listens to your voice when you talk to him in a soothing way, watches you, smiles and reaches out his arms when he sees you coming, and coos.

- **Watch together to get to know your special baby.** What makes her smile? What makes her cry? What are the things she can already do?
- **Look for patterns to help you know what to expect and how to respond.** How does he like to be comforted? How can you tell when he is tired? When does he sleep? For how long? When does he want to eat? How do you know?

Pay attention to your relationship. Parenting requires teamwork. When you pay attention to your relationship, you will find you have more to give to your child. Some of the issues you may want to discuss and work on together include:

- **Your roles.** Talk together to find your answers to questions such as, “Who takes the lead on what?” “How do we make decisions now?”
- **Communicating in person.** There can be so much to say, it may be hard to get started. On the other hand, you may feel like strangers. After living for months in separate and very different worlds, it can take time to feel comfortable again talking face to face.
- **Your personal relationship.** Patience and realistic expectations can help you overcome feelings of awkwardness and distance. Respect each other’s need for some time alone if desired by either one of you. Spend time together as a couple by getting someone to care for your child(ren) while you go out.

Finally, be kind to yourself and to each other. Even the most joyful events in life—including homecoming and the birth of a new baby—can be stressful. It can take time to adjust. (Combat/operational stress injuries can make adjusting more difficult. For more information about this, see the brochure *Combat Stress*.)

But you are home and all together again, and that’s what matters.

Remember the Wonder of the Everyday

Take time to . . . watch your baby sleep, listen to the sounds she makes, cuddle with her on the sofa, rock her in the rocking chair, talk with her about what you are doing and seeing together, sing her a song, tell her a story or read to her (it is never too early for this!), take her to the park, and so forth. These everyday moments give you the chance to get to know your baby, reconnect, and enjoy being together again.

Resources for Families

MilitaryHOMEFRONT: 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 One Source: 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 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

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