

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



# SUPPORTING BABIES AND TODDLERS IN MILITARY FAMILIES



A  
PROFESSIONAL  
GUIDE





## Introduction

**Y**ou may be an early childhood educator, a mental health provider, a health care provider, a home visitor, or in another family support role. This users' guide is designed to help you use the *Supporting Babies and Toddlers in Military Families* brochure series in your work with families.

These brochures focus on the unique experience of parenting a baby or toddler, particularly during times of stress and separation that military families may be experiencing. They blend sound research and knowledge with quotes, stories, and tips gathered during interviews with military families.

Military families have a wide array of strengths and skills. They want the best for their young children. Like most parents, they are looking for information about how children develop and what they can do and say to help their children thrive.

Resilience is a major theme running through every brochure: the resilience of babies and toddlers, families, and the military community. Babies are born with a drive to understand their world and master new skills. They seek out relationships and are active partners in shaping them.

As members of the military community, families support each other. This becomes especially important as families face shared stressors and challenges during a time of war.

When you recognize and acknowledge the strengths of parents and children, you give them resources they can use to draw upon and build. These brochures will support you in your vitally important work.

# THE FIVE BROCHURES

The series includes the following:

- **Deployment: Keeping Relationships Strong** focuses on how to help a baby or toddler feel secure by keeping parent-child connections strong—whether a parent is at home or halfway across the world.
- **Homecoming** focuses on how to help a baby or toddler feel secure during homecoming by having realistic expectations as family members reconnect and begin to discover a “new” normal.
- **New Families** focuses on how to support a baby when expecting or after the baby is born by building strong and nurturing relationships around and with the baby.
- **Combat Stress** focuses on how parents support their young child by taking steps to heal. No one suffers a stress injury alone. This brochure provides information about combat/operational stress injuries, steps to help heal them, and people and organizations ready to offer support.
- **Homefront** focuses on how parents at home take better care of their baby or toddler by taking care of themselves.

## Key Messages About Babies and Toddlers

These key messages are found in each guide. Highlight them as you discuss the brochures with families.

- It’s all about relationships. The relationships surrounding babies, especially those with their parents and other trusted caregivers shape how they experience the world and see themselves.
- Babies and toddlers communicate their feelings and needs through their behavior. Their behavior has meaning. It’s up to you to figure out what it is.
- The little things you say and do day by day make a big difference. Everyday routines and activities such as bathing, dressing, eating, and playing together are rich learning opportunities for parents, babies, and toddlers.
- How you are is as important as what you say and do. Babies tune into feelings of their parents and other trusted adults.
- Babies and toddlers are resilient. Adults who are loving, trusted, and responsive can help babies and toddlers manage during difficult times.
- Taking care of yourself is a key way to take care of your baby or toddler. When parents feel nurtured, they have more energy, patience, and focus.



## HOW EACH BROCHURE IS ORGANIZED

### Every brochure:

- Begins with a quote(s) from a military parent(s) or expert and an Overview of the topic to be covered.
- Ends by encouraging parents to Remember the Wonder of the Everyday with a list of daily routines and activities to enjoy with their child.
- Includes boxes of information (e.g., the cycles of deployment or helpful resources) and What Do You Think? questions that invite parents to reflect on what they and their child(ren) are feeling and experiencing.

Three sections make up the majority of the text in each brochure. Each is a step of a decision-making process that parents (and other caregivers of babies and toddlers) can use in everyday situations:

- **What You May Experience and Feel:** To support your child, begin by trying to understand your experiences and feelings. This section acknowledges the intense, often mixed, and normal feelings that accompany pregnancy, parenthood, and unique stressors faced by military parents. Parents see how being aware of their feelings can help them build the loving, trusting, responsive relationships their young child needs to feel safe and secure.
- **What Your Child May Experience and Feel:** Next, try to understand what



your child experiences and feels. In this section, parents are encouraged to watch their child from the outside with the goal of trying to understand what their child may be experiencing on the inside. Charts that look through a child's eyes in a child's words can be found in *Deployment: Keeping Relationships Strong, Homecoming, and Combat Stress*.

- **Supporting Your Child:** Finally, use what you have learned to decide how best to respond. This section includes practical, everyday tips parents at home and those who are deployed can use to strengthen their parenting partnership as they work together to support their child(ren) under 3 years of age.

## HOW THESE BROCHURES CAN HELP YOU SUPPORT MILITARY FAMILIES

Written for parents, these brochures can be rich tools in your work with military families. They can help you do the following:

- Build a bridge and strengthen your relationship with families. Seeing that you have written materials that reflect their circumstances, experiences, feelings, and needs tells military families you know and care about them.
- Begin conversations about families' experiences and daily life. The information and insights you gather will help your interactions with families be as supportive as possible.
- Provide helpful information to families in clear, easy-to-understand language. Brochures are written to be easy to read and understand.
- Keep a focus on the babies and toddlers. Each brochure offers insights into what babies and toddlers from military families might be experiencing and provides concrete tips for supporting young children in the course of everyday life.
- Introduce families to a decision-making process. This strategy can help parents make more reflective, effective decisions, thereby enhancing their sense of competence and their relationship with their child in years to come.

### Using the Brochures With Families

Whether you are sharing these brochures with parents in a child care setting, during a well-baby appointment, or during a home visit, the following are a series of ideas to get you started. You are already supporting families. If you recognize the strategies below, consider this a reminder and validation of the valuable work you do. If strategies are new, try them. You may find it helpful to reflect on how things went with a trusted colleague and identify together what worked and what you might try differently, if anything, next time. Adapt these ideas as necessary depending on your setting, whether you have 15 minutes or 45 minutes with families and whether you are meeting with a parent individually or in a group.

### Building Relationships to Support Families: Strategies to Remember



Research shows that warm and responsive relationships can buffer babies and toddlers from the effects of stress and strengthen a child's sense of "I can do it." When parents trust and feel safe talking with you, they are more likely to get the support and information they need. They feel responded to and cared for, which in turn, makes it possible for them to be more available for their babies and toddlers—and the positive cycle continues.

Here are a series of strategies for building trusting relationships with families. You may do these things every day. If so, use this as a confirmation of your good practice. If not, we encourage you to try these ideas:

- **Help parents feel safe to talk about the tough topics.** Give parents openings to talk by asking questions and sharing your observations. For example: "How are you doing?" "You look tired today . . ." "Homecoming can be very stressful for everyone. How's it going for you?"
- **Avoid stereotyping and making assumptions. Remember every family member and family is unique and deserves your respect.** Approach each with an open mind as you learn about their parenting styles, experiences, successes, and challenges.
- **Be a learner.** Ask families questions. Remember, you do not—and cannot—know it all. By being a genuine learner, you make it easier for families to be open to learning, too.
- **Be realistic about how much time and energy parents have and how much new information they can absorb.** Encourage parents to find one or two new ideas or strategies to try.
- **Be aware that families are looking to you for cues about how they are doing.** When you believe families can cope, they sense this.

## Strategies to Highlight Various Features of the Brochures Include:

### Opening Quotes

- **Use the quotes as a nonthreatening way to begin discussions.** Ask, "Are your feelings/experiences the same or different? How?"

### Overview

- **Summarize main points** that will be discussed in each brochure.

### Helping parents be aware of what they may experience and feel

- **Invite families to share their own thoughts or quotes about the topic of the brochure you are looking at together.** Invite families to write their quotes on the brochure.
- **Ask "How are things going?" Invite families to share where they are in the deployment cycle or spiral of deployment.** This will give you some context to better understand the main issues with which a family is coping. Refer families to the sections about this in the brochures, titled *On Deployment: Keeping Relationships Strong* and *Homecoming*.
- **Encourage reflection with questions in the What Do You Think? boxes. Make up other questions.** You may want to discuss these questions with a parent (or parents) and encourage parents to discuss them with spouses, with other family members, and/or with friends who are parents.
- **Invite parents to share how their experiences and feelings are the same or different from those of families described in the brochures.**

- **Highlight that parents are not alone, a message conveyed in each brochure. Help parents build and strengthen their support network.** Strategies to help you do this include the following:
  - o Become familiar and have personal connections with resources on your installation and/or in your community.
  - o Brainstorm with families all the supports they have and need.
  - o Explore with families support organizations and services (military and civilian) listed throughout these brochures and others you know. For example, be with families when they call Military OneSource or go online.
  - o Make a list with families of their support people and organizations. Include phone numbers and websites. Encourage families to place this list, a reminder that they are not alone, near their phone or computer or on the refrigerator where they can see it, use it, and add to it as their network grows.

### Basic Resources for Families

**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)



- **Discuss why it is important that parents be aware of how they are feeling.** Highlight the idea: *How you are is as important as what you do*, which is discussed in each brochure.

### Helping parents think about what their child might be experiencing

- **Highlight the message about the importance of loving, trusting, responsive relationships for babies and toddlers.** Ask parents how they feel when they are with someone they trust and love. Brainstorm with parents things they do and say every day that tell their children, “I love you,” “You can trust me,” and “I know you.”
- **Highlight the message in each brochure that babies and toddlers notice changes in their world and in their parents’ emotions.** Find examples in the brochures. Brainstorm with parents the changes and emotions their child might be noticing lately. Then talk about ways parents can help their children feel safe and secure.
- **Help parents “read” their child’s behavior.** Explain that parenting is like being a detective. Ask parents, “What do you think he/she might be feeling/thinking?” as you observe a child with a parent or talk about a child’s behavior. This can encourage them to look beyond the behavior to its meaning.

## The Deployment Cycle

- **Predeployment**, the time before deployment, is often strained with endless “Honey-do lists” and uncertainty about the future. Arguments between spouses typically increase as it gets closer to saying “goodbye.” Why? It’s easier to get upset at someone than feel the pain of parting. It can be helpful—and difficult—for couples in this stage to talk about what they expect of each other while they are apart.
- **Active deployment** lasts from departure through the first month or so of deployment. It is commonly a time filled with emotional ups and downs.
- **Sustainment** lasts until the month before the service member returns home. This is when the parent at home establishes new routines, builds a support network, and begins to feel “I can do this.” Still there is ongoing concern and worry about what the service member may be experiencing—especially when he or she is in a combat zone.
- **Redeployment** is the month before the Service member returns home. This is a time of deep and mixed feelings.
- **Postdeployment** begins with arrival home and typically lasts 3 to 6 months. A “honeymoon” period often follows the return. As the days and weeks go by, parents are faced with challenge of having to rebalance and renegotiate roles and responsibilities. This can be a rich opportunity to assess and make positive changes in their relationship for the future.

### Deployment as a Spiral

A survey recently conducted by the National Military Family Association (NMFA) reveals that families experiencing multiple deployments think about deployment as a “spiral.” This describes their feeling of never getting back to the place they started as they reunite knowing another deployment is coming.



## How a Child May Say, "This Is a Hard Time for Me": Behaviors Parents Might See/What You Might Hear

Watching a child from the outside can help you understand what she is experiencing on the inside.

- Increased clinginess, crying, and whining: "He's really getting on my nerves." "She sticks to me like glue."
- Greater fear of separation from parent at home or other primary caregiver: "She doesn't let me out of her sight." "I feel like I can't have a minute on my own."
- Increase in aggressive behavior: "She's being bad."
- Withdrawal: "He's never been this good before."
- Lack of interest in activities and other people: "He doesn't seem interested in anything." "She just sits there."
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns: "She falls asleep when we are out." "He used to love scrambled eggs and carrots. Now he just pushes them aside."
- More frustration and difficulty comforting: "Nothing I do makes her happy."
- A return to earlier behaviors, such as waking up at night, toileting accidents, and thumb sucking: "He's acting like such a baby."
- Increase in attention-getting behaviors, both positive and negative: "He's always trying to get my attention."

- **Give parents language and strategies to advocate for their child with care providers (e.g., a child care provider, physician, babysitter) who may not be familiar with the experiences of a military family.** "I am leaving for Iraq next month. Can we find a time to talk about what this means for Kara?" "Here are some behaviors you may see that will tell you Kara needs some extra support."
- **Encourage parents to start by finding an idea or two in each brochure to try.** Have them circle or underline the ideas they try or write them on the cover of their brochures. Talk about how it went and what steps parents might take to support their child further.
- **Remind parents that no one knows it all when it comes to babies and toddlers.** Invite parents to share a story of a time they learned something new about their child by trial and error.
- **Celebrate the wonder and joy of babies and toddlers with families.** Take time to observe an infant discovering her hands or listen to a toddler's silly song. It is refueling and will strengthen your collaboration by reminding you of the precious human being you are supporting together.

## Helping parents respond in ways that support their baby or toddler

- **Talk with parents about how the little things they say and do make a difference.** Use the charts in *Deployment: Keeping Relationships Strong, Homecoming and Combat Stress* to make this point.
- **Invite parents to share stories of a time when being with someone they love and trust helped them make it through a stressful time.** Explain that they can help buffer stress for their child. Using examples in the brochures and others, brainstorm things that parents can do or say to help their young child make it through a difficult time.



## Taking Care of Yourself

### Ten Tips for Self-Care for the Early Childhood Professional

1. Eat well. Don't skip meals, especially breakfast. Reach for healthy foods during that late afternoon slump. Avoid sugar, caffeine, and junk food because they only give you a temporary boost of energy. These foods also cause an energy "crash" only a little while after eating them, when the sugar or caffeine is processed in the body.
2. Drink fluids. Drink plenty of water or other noncaffeinated drinks during the day. Dehydration can cause fatigue and other ailments.
3. Exercise. Regular exercise is a great stress reducer. Walking, yoga, basketball, or any other activity that gets the body moving triggers the release of calming chemicals that fight stress.
4. Sleep. Make sure you get the sleep you need. Create a quiet routine at bed time to help you fall asleep. Try a bath, music, or reading. Turn off the stressful night time news shows. Catching up on lost sleep does help. Imagine you have a sleep "bank." If you lose sleep, try to catch up with a nap so you keep your sleep bank full.
5. Laugh. Laughter really is the best medicine. Studies have shown that regular laughter actually helps the body heal from illness! Find the funny in daily life, or seek out comedies at the movie theater.
6. Discover your passion. What do you love to do? When was the last time you did it? Crafts, reading, music, dance—remember or discover what lights a fire in you. Passions renew our spirits and give us breaks from daily stress.
7. Relax. Schedule quiet time in your daily routine, even if only for 5 minutes. Listen to soothing music, pray, or practice relaxation breathing. Just 5 minutes of daily meditation or quiet breathing has been shown to improve health.
8. Balance. Strive to create balance between work, play, and rest in your life. Learn to say no to tasks that create a work overload. Build in a walk or bath into a day of hard emotional work. Let the laundry pile up so you can see that movie!
9. Treat yourself. Do something that is just for you! Cook your favorite meal. Wrap yourself in a blanket and listen to your favorite music. Think of a treat or activity that is just for you to enjoy and do it!
10. Connect. Friends can be the best remedy for a stressful work life. Take time to connect with friends, family, and coworkers who give you an emotional boost and fill you with good energy that will carry you through a tough day.

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## Resources for You

Here are some resources from ZERO TO THREE to support you in the incredibly important and challenging work you do:

*What's Best for My Baby and Me: A Three Step Guide for Parents* by Claire Lerner and Amy Laura Dombro (ZERO TO THREE, 2006). The three-step approach in this short, easy-to-read book helps parents and caregivers find their own solutions to everyday parenting challenges.

*How You Are Is as Important as What You Do . . . in Making a Positive Difference for Infants, Toddlers and Their Families* by Jeree H. Pawl and Maria St. John (ZERO TO THREE, 1998). This guide contains a series of engaging stories that you and colleagues can use to reflect on the relationships you build every day with babies, toddlers, and families and the powerful role they play in supporting young children.

*Learning and Growing Together With Families: Partnering With Parents to Support Young Children's Development* by Jeree H. Pawl and Amy L. Dombro (ZERO TO THREE, 2001). The real-life vignettes and simple but powerful exercises in this book are designed to help you take a personal look at what you bring to your professional practice of building relationships with children and families.



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