Military Stepfamilies: Unique Challenges

All military families face unique challenges compared to civilian families. If you’ve been in a military family for even a short period of time, you’ve probably learned a lot already about the need to be flexible, adaptable, and optimistic in the face of relocations, deployments, and dealing with the day to day uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring. On top of all of this, you might find yourself in the middle of stepfamily life in the military, and you may come to see that there were challenges for which the military had not prepared you.

The good news is that you are certainly not alone! Just about 1/3 of military families are estimated to involve a remarriage, many of which create stepfamilies. Again, these families face challenges that are unique even in the context of the military. Relationships in stepfamilies are complex to begin with, so adding the stressors that come with relocations and deployments on top of the normal stresses of stepfamily life can create an even bigger challenge.

Luckily there are some things you can do to help your family successfully face these challenges head on!

**Relocations**

Relocations are difficult for all military families. From changing schools, to making new friends, to moving far away from anything familiar, they can be especially difficult on children. In stepfamilies, however, relocation can also mean having to move children far away from a biological parent, sparking new issues over custody, visitation, and serious feelings of loss for the children. If the service member who is being relocated is the stepparent, it can also put extra strain on relationships with stepchildren, who may come to resent the stepparent for “causing” all of the change. Other times, the parent who is relocating is the non-resident parent. This can be equally difficult for children who will be unable to see their parent as often as they are used to, especially for long distance and overseas moves.

While the relocation can be difficult for everyone in the family, it is important to pay close attention to how the children in the stepfamily are being affected and to be sensitive to the unique changes they are experiencing. Also, it is wise to discuss the possibility of relocation with any non-resident parents early on in the remarriage. This can help prevent surprises, and you might even be able develop a plan for when it happens. For example, a special fund could be set aside to allow for more frequent visits to non-resident parents if either parent is relocated. When frequent visits are not a practical option, consistent long-distance communication and rituals can help ease some of the pain and loss experienced by both parents and children. Current technology makes it easy to set aside special time for long-distance parents and children to use video chat to read bedtime stories or even play online games together. The internet allows family members to stay close in other ways too, such as sharing photos and daily experiences through social networking sites like Facebook. For older children, having the ability to communicate through text messages with a parent who is far away might also help them feel more connected.

**Deployments**

It doesn’t matter whether the parent or stepparent is leaving; deployment is uniquely hard on military stepfamilies. It interruptions stepfamilies that are in the process of coming together and creating their new family culture and puts extra stress on family relationships. The specific challenges can vary when the deployed parent is a resident, non-resident, or stepparent.

*Resident biological parent.* Depending on the stepfamily and where the non-resident parent lives, when a resident biological parent is deployed the children might stay with the stepparent full-time or temporarily go to live with the non-resident parent, if he or she is close by, or another family member. Either way, family life is disrupted.

Stepparents who do continue to care for stepchildren full-time when a parent is deployed...
must handle the usual stress and grief of deployment as well as the transition into the role of being the sole authority. It isn’t very practical to get the biological parent on Skype from overseas to handle every little squabble or disagreement. So stepparents who have not yet gained their stepchildren’s respect as a valid parent must find ways to maintain parental authority and manage the family without the immediate support of their spouse. It can be helpful for families to create a plan for the biological parent’s absence long before deployment becomes a reality. A specific list of rules and consequences can be created and then signed by all family members, indicating an agreement that the stepparent has the parent’s full support in enforcing discipline as needed during the deployment. Setting up the expectation for the stepparent’s role during a parent’s deployment might help ease the transition and bridge a gap between the authority of the biological and stepparent. Because stepparents aren’t currently granted any legal authority over stepchildren within the United States, prior to the biological parent leaving, it will be important to have legal authority granted to the stepparent who is going to be in charge when he or she is gone. This can take the form of a fairly simple notarized statement signed by the biological parent. Check with a military legal advisor.

If stepchildren leave the home to stay with their other biological parent, the stepparent’s developing relationship with the children can be set back. When possible, it is best for stepparents and stepchildren to have regular contact. This can include video calls and giving rides to activities like dance practice or local minor league baseball games. Getting season tickets to the local minor league baseball games or giving rides to dance practice every Thursday can be a way to maintain a relationship between the children and the stepparent. Setting up the expectation for the stepparent’s role during a parent’s deployment might help ease the transition back into regular stepparent role during the deployment. Getting season tickets during the deployment can help the stepparent feel more connected to stepchildren upon return. When children stay in contact with any deployed parent it makes the adjustment to family life after deployment a bit easier. For example, stepparents who are being deployed can make a pact with stepchildren to each write a letter or email once a week while they are away.

Keep in mind that although military life is difficult for all children, those in stepfamilies have also experienced family transitions outside of military norms, such as their parents’ divorce and remarriage. The common transitions experienced by military families can seem to pile up on children in stepfamilies and increase stress. However, most military children become very good at handling change, which can make them better at coping with stresses of stepfamily life compared to the average civilian child. Military families also have a strong support system to utilize, including friends in the military community and the many services available to help families make successful transitions.

Sources