



National Stepfamily
Resource Center

Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

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 stepchil-

dren, 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 interrupts 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 fulltime 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



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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 con-

tact, even if the biological parent is not around to serve as a common link. A weekly visit with the stepparent is also a great time to set up regular contact with the deployed parent if you are able to do so. If it makes the children or stepparent uncomfortable to have an overnight or full weekend visit, other activities like seeing

a movie or going bowling may be a better idea. Finding ways to maintain a relationship between stepparents and stepchildren can make the transition back into regular stepfamily life a bit easier when the deployed parent returns.

Non-resident biological parent. When non-resident biological parents are deployed, visitation can become an issue. If you are the non-resident stepparent, you may or may not continue to have visits with your stepchildren while your spouse is away. Again, this is something that should be discussed prior to any possible deployment. Resident parents need to be brought into this conversation too, because they might have different expectations. No matter what side of this issue you find yourself on, you should consider what is best for the children involved. Particularly if the children wish to see the stepparent when the deployed parent is away, it is important to try to make it happen. It can help children hold onto the bond with the deployed parent as well as the stepparent for the duration of the deployment. Getting season tickets to the local minor league baseball games or giving rides to dance practice every Thursday are great ways to stay regularly connected. Just because the biological parent is gone, it doesn't mean the stepparent has to stop supporting his or her stepchildren at their soccer games every weekend.

Resident and non-resident stepparents. When stepparents are deployed, resident or non-resident, the developing and sometimes fragile relationship between the stepchild and stepparent can be impacted. It might even be tempt-

ing for a family to go back to some of their pre-stepfamily ways of life when the stepparent leaves. The spouse of the deployed stepparent should encourage and support continued contact between the children and the stepparent. Similar to how many new stepparents feel during the early stages of stepfamily life, the stepparent returning from a deployment might re-experience the feelings of being an "outsider" in the family, more so than returning parents from non-stepfamilies. Working to maintain step-relationships 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

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