



# Supporting Defence families



## Being a military parent: you, your children and the military way of life

It is often considered that during a deployment phase, the parent left behind is the main source of emotional nurturing and guidance to the children. This role is often, but certainly not always, filled by the mother. In fact, this may be said of many families not experiencing deployment but simply facing day to day family life..

### Military parents

In general, Australian society has long believed, in varying degrees, that a father's involvement in child-rearing is important. Significant evidence suggests that involved fathers contribute uniquely to their children's well-being. Mounting scientific evidence now suggests this influence to be of particular significance when fathers are emotionally available to their children.

The father-child relationship evokes powerful emotions in children and while a mother's involvement and influence is significant, findings now indicate that a father's influence can be much more extreme, whether good or bad (Gottman, 1997).

At a recent National Guard (USA) workshop, a soldier participant suggested that while all parents experience stress, military parents face more challenges in dealing with children's emotions — because soldiers are trained to not let emotions interfere. Whether or not you believe this to be true in Australia, it is worth reflecting on.

'All of your training in the military is to react — react, react, react, react, react — not respond, not think about it — it's to react,' (Shunkwiler, University of Minnesota).

The following paragraphs briefly discuss the importance of emotional connectivity with children; in particular we consider parenting styles to support this and the concept of the parent (both mother and father) as Emotion Coach.

### Emotional keys for successful parenting

The ultimate goal of raising children should not be simply to have an obedient and compliant child. The majority of parents hope for much more for their children.

Dr. Gottman's research discovered that love by itself wasn't enough. 'We found that concerned, warm, and involved parents often had attitudes toward their and their children's emotions that got in the way ... when the child was sad or afraid or angry,' he writes. 'The secret to being an emotionally intelligent parent lay in how parents interacted with their children when emotions ran hot.'

Observations by researchers suggest that children benefit the most when parents themselves have a strong relationship. 'In families where the parents aren't living with each other or are not going to stay married, the parents can best help their children by minimizing their children's exposure to destructive conflict. High levels of parental conflict create emotional distress in children and decrease effective parenting skills.' (Gottman, 1997)

### The Importance of the father-child relationship

Evidence suggests fathers may influence children, particularly boys, in:

- The child's peer relationships.
- The child's school achievement.

Fathers typically relate to children differently than mothers do, leading to the development of a





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different set of competencies, noticeable in the area of social relationships.

Clear indication exists that girls with involved and present fathers are:

- less likely to engage in sexually promiscuous behaviour at a young age, and
- more likely to forge healthy relationships with men in adulthood.

The most positive influence has been noted with fathers who neither dismissed nor disapproved of their children's negative emotions.

## Evidence

A range of studies report that children who struggled with grades and social relationships had fathers who were authoritarian, cold, derogatory and intrusive. A three year follow up study participants revealed those children with non-supportive, humiliating fathers were displaying aggressive behaviour toward school friends; having the most trouble at school; experiencing problems often linked to delinquency and youth violence. These children also suffered poor health by comparison.

Gottman and other researchers provide a surprising finding in concluding that the quality of contact with the mother was not as strong a predictor of the child's later success or failure with school and friends.

One long-term study, begun in the 1950s, revealed that children whose fathers were present and involved in their care when they were 5 years of age, developed as more empathetic, compassionate adults than those whose fathers were absent. By age 41, the study participants who had experienced greater warmth from their fathers were like to have better social relationships – longer, happier marriages, relationships with their own children, and engagement in recreational activities with non-family members.

'Children's lives are greatly enhanced by fathers who are emotionally present, validating, able to offer comfort in times of distress. By the same token, children can be deeply harmed by father

who are abusive, highly critical, humiliating, or emotionally cold' *Dr John Gottman, 1997*

Research indicates that boys with absent fathers experience greater difficulty in finding a balance between masculine assertiveness and self-restraint. He suggests it is consequently tougher for them to learn self-control and to delay gratification.

Gottman's researchers ultimately determined that successful parents tended to do five very simple things with their children when they were emotional. He calls these five elements 'Emotion Coaching.' He discovered that children who had 'Emotion Coaches' for parents were on an entirely different, more positive developmental trajectory than the children of other parents.

## The emotion coach

- Be aware of your child's emotions.
- Recognise emotional expression as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching.
- Listen empathetically and validate your child's feelings.
- Label emotions in words your child can understand.
- Help your child come up with an appropriate way to solve a problem or deal with an upsetting issue or situation.

Given the nature of the military lifestyle, fathers may find themselves physically absent at times. However, the relationship built during times of being present in the family in addition to working on maintaining relationships whilst away.

Not only do our troops who are fighting to keep our country safe experience the trauma of missing their loved ones, many military wives, mothers, and children also suffer separation anxiety. Children sense anxiety particularly when a mother and child are very close, when the mother is upset, so is the child.









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## Helping children understand their fears

Children need these things from parents and caregivers when they have fears:

**Support:** 'Everyone has fears and it is okay that you have them.'

**Comfort:** 'I can understand why you are fearful and upset about your dad being deployed.'

**Room to feel:** 'Maybe you need a few minutes to cry and then we can talk about your fears for your mum's safety.'

## Talk

'Let's talk about why you are afraid of your dad leaving.'

## Chances to learn

'Maybe we can think of ways to help you be less fearful next time your parents are deployed.'

*Developed by University of Missouri and Lincoln University, in collaboration with USDA, DoD and Virginia Tech.*

## 'Learn-as-you-go'

The ultimate 'learn-as-you-go' experience is parenting, which is entered into with no more than a vague notion of how do it until you are doing it.

This being the case parenting style matters even more – not just because it affects the way children turn out, but because it affects your relationship with them.

Outlined below are some suggestions for the deployed parent to maintain relationships and emotional connection with their children during absences:

1. Keep a daily journal specifically for your children. You might even want to keep another confidential journal for your own personal feelings. In the one you will share with the children let them know how much they were on your mind and in your heart while you were away.

2. Encourage the children to write to you. It is good to hear about life back home and writing letters to the parent away is a great way for the kids to feel you are not missing their life.
3. Write back when you can, especially when you can't use other means of communication like email and calls back home.
4. Talk openly with the children and your role in the military. Keep the conversation age appropriate but answer any questions they have as honestly as you can. Discuss their fears and yours.
5. Know that you are not alone. Talk to others about the children and spouses that they left behind at home. Sharing stories with others is a great way to keep the family close in your thoughts and heart while you are away.
6. Make the most of your leave and time at home. Focus on the quality not the quantity of the time you get to spend with the children. As much as possible, leave work at work and enjoy family time after work hours.

How to Be a Military Dad:

[www.ehow.com/how\\_2156507\\_be-military-dad](http://www.ehow.com/how_2156507_be-military-dad)

## Children's understanding of military conflicts

For preschoolers, images of military conflict can mean something big and powerful, like witches and monsters. This can lead to confusion about the realities of war.

As a result, they need frequent reminders that their family and home are safe.

For school-aged children, watching news reports can also lead to confusion over what is real and unreal.

You can help by reminding them that war is real and not like videogames or make believe on TV.

(University of Missouri and Lincoln University, in collaboration with USDA, DoD and Virginia Tech)









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listening is as important as sending the message.

<http://www.pairs.com>  
<http://www.pairs.com/downloads/fairfightforchange.pdf>

<http://www.pairs.com/downloads/fairfightforchange.pdf> Invite Partner

## Suggested reading

*The Military Father: A Hands-on Guide for Deployed Dads* (New Father Series) Armin A. Brott, (a former US Military Marine)

'The Military Father', written by a leading authority on fathers and families, provides deployed dads with ways to stay (or become) involved with and connected to their family regardless of the distance that separates them. The book covers pre-deployment, deployment and coming home. It explores the profound effect a dad's absence will have on his spouse, his children, and himself. Included are specific strategies and activities

Designed to help dads and their family remain close across time and distance. Brott offers advice on post-deployment times from preparing to come home and surmounting the challenges of returning to military or civilian life.

The book includes a chapter on how dads can support a spouse when she's the one being deployed, and a comprehensive listing of resources available to soldiers and their families.

*My Dad's Deployment: A deployment and reunion activity book for young children* Julie LaBelle (Author)

This is an activity book features mazes, dot-to-dot, crafts and other activities familiar to preschool and early elementary children. All within the context of common deployment and reunion topics, the activities reinforce concepts young children are already learning and offer children the opportunity to ask questions, talk about their feelings, and feel

connected to their deployed parent. This version is specific to a dad's deployment.

*The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst (Author)

This book is a very simple approach to overcoming the fear of loneliness or separation with an imaginative flair that children can easily identify with and remember. A reassuring story that addresses the issue of 'separation anxiety' of children of all ages.

Specifically written to address children's fear of being apart from the ones they love.

## References

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How to Be a Military Dad |  
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Missing Dad in the Military - Parents in the Military - Parenting\_com.htm, Dr William Sears, 2012

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The Invisible String, Patrice Karst, 2000. DeVorss & Co, California.

The Military Father: A Hands-on Guide for Deployed Dads (New Father Series), 2009

Armin A. Brott. Abbeville Press Publishers. New York.

University of Missouri and Lincoln University, in collaboration with USDA, DoD and Virginia Tech, 2012.

For more information on this handout and other Defence Community Organisation support services visit [www.defence.gov.au/dco](http://www.defence.gov.au/dco) or call the all-hours Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

