

How to support children whose parent works away for long periods

24 December 2019, by Marg Rogers



Families can use various strategies to keep children connected with a parent who's away for work. Credit: Shutterstock/Orsan Elitok

It's not always possible for families to be together during the Christmas holidays if one parent is working away for several days. They could be on a tour of duty for the Australian Defence Force or in a fly-in, fly-out mining position.

Other jobs, such as those in long-distance transport, firefighting, seasonal agriculture and other occupations, can also regularly take a parent away from home.

Such types of work can be challenging for those seeking a good [work-life balance](#). The parent who works away [misses out on time with family](#), which can be especially difficult with [younger children](#).

But there are things families can do to support [children](#) when one parent is away.

Home alone

Previous research has found [young children in military families respond in various ways](#) to prolonged separation from a parent.

[Physical responses](#) include disturbed sleep

(nightmares, unable to self-settle, taking longer to fall asleep) and regressions in toileting and feeding.

[Emotional responses](#) can be an increase in tears, anger, outbursts and withdrawing to avoid further hurt.

[Social responses](#) include children struggling with daily routines. They might be less likely to cope with the normal frustrations that happen when playing with friends and siblings. Clingy behavior with adults may also occur, which isolates children from their friends.

The good news is parents can support their young children in a number of ways to build resilience. Families shared these ideas in my research.

The power of narratives

Some programs [recommend developing a family narrative](#). These narratives might be a simple sentence children can use when asked about their absent parent.

For example: "Mum went away on a plane. She is coming home on a plane three sleeps after Easter."

Here is a family narrative a 2.5-year-old child told me: "I miss my daddy. He in Afghanistan. I not go Afghanistan. Mummy not go Afghanistan. Only Daddy go Afghanistan."

Positive activities that nurture a child's emotional connection with a parent who is away are also important.

This includes encouraging children to draw a picture of an activity they are looking forward to doing with their parent when they return, such as going swimming or visiting the local park.

The parent at home can help by writing down what

the picture represents. This can be put in a parcel to [family](#) that has a parent frequently away from home. send to the parent who is away. Keeping a copy of the drawing can help with communication between the child and the returned parent on reunion. They can discuss and plan family activities together.

With help, children can also write emails and postcards, even record voice or video messages about what they miss, how they feel and what they're looking forward to doing when the parent gets back.

The parent who works away can also pre-prepare some short video stories about what they liked doing as a child, something they enjoy now and what they hope to do when they return. These can then be played at home when contact is not possible.

Homemade resources children can use to self-soothe when they are missing their parent are useful. These could include a small photo album of the parent and child, a recordable story book with their parent's voice, or a video of the parent reading them some stories.

Make a time-line sticker chart children can personalize to count off the days. It could start with when the parent left, then include holidays and birthdays, and end when they will return.

Getting support

My [research](#), which explored the experiences of children aged two to five in 11 Australian Defence Force families, found parents left at home caring for children can feel unsupported.

There is a lack of available resources to help them have conversations with their young children about the parent working away.

One parent said: "Look, you are just on your own when the kids are young, before they go to school. There is nothing out there."

To address this gap, I've created two free ebooks, based on the experiences of defense families: [Waiting for Daddy](#) and [Now that I am big](#). Although defense-focused, they should be useful to any

Social media support groups organized informally by [parents](#) and other organizations can help support families working in various industries. These include [Mining Family Matters](#), [Australian Mining](#), [Defence Community Organisation](#), [Defence Families Australia](#) and [Department of Defence](#).

Research shows [good early intervention programs make a big difference](#) to children's healthy development and their ability to thrive.

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