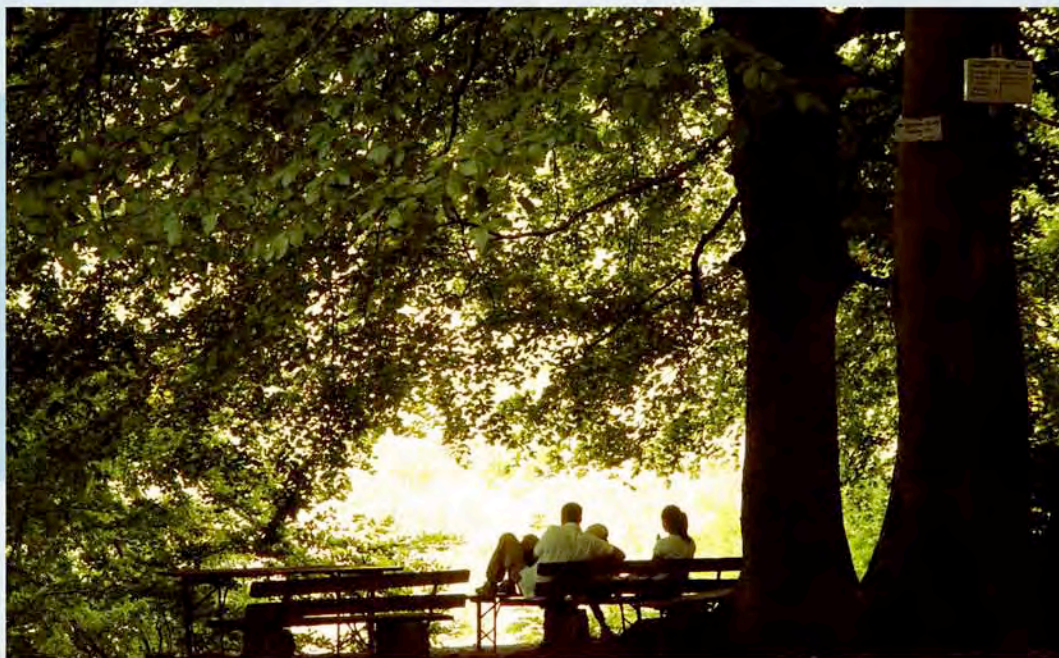


VETERAN PARENTING TOOLKIT: TOGETHER BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES



PROVIDER GUIDE

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Being a parent can be one of the most rewarding, yet also stressful, roles in Veterans' lives. Furthermore, parenthood can be dramatically affected by deployment(s), and Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are re-negotiating many roles as they re-enter family life. Perhaps the Veteran is meeting his/her infant for the first time, or his/her toddler is much more active and vocal than before the deployment, or his/her teenager is now driving. Regardless of the child's age, the Veteran has likely missed many months or even years of development and changes, so it's not surprising that parenting challenges are common among our returning troops and their families.

Also, many couples struggle with re-negotiating parenting roles after deployment, as at-home parents often managed the parenting responsibilities independently while the Veteran was gone. Partners may be reluctant to let their Veteran change routines that worked well during his/her absence, and Veterans may feel anxious about how to re-engage as a parent. Veterans and their partners are simultaneously getting reconnected as a couple and redefining their roles as co-parents. Helping them communicate about and sort through these complicated issues can be very useful.

How Can I Assess Parenting Issues?

Good questions for providers:

How did your children do during your deployment(s)?

- How was it for you, as a parent, to be away for so long?
- How was the experience of "single parenting" for your partner?

How are your children adjusting to you being home?

- How is it for you to be back with your children after being gone?
- How is your partner adjusting to you being at home?
- How are you and your partner working together in parenting?

How have your relationships with your children changed?

- How have your children changed?
- What challenges are you facing in parenting? (are there any behaviors or issues that are especially difficult to manage?)
- What concerns do you have about your children?



What do you enjoy doing with your child/children?

- What is your favorite time of day with your child?
- What is the funniest thing your child ever did?



In some ways, coming back from a deployment gives parents a new opportunity to decide what kind of parent they want to be for their children and what is important in their family. So, you may ask:

- How has deployment changed the kind of parent you want to be?
- What kind of parent do you want to be today?
- As parenting can be stressful, what are you doing to take care of yourself?

How Can I Use These Booklets With the Veterans I Treat?

In asking Veterans about parenting issues, you may detect **worry** (e.g., “What does it mean that my baby won’t roll over?”), **questions** (e.g., “Should my child be able to form complete sentences by now?”) **confusion** (e.g., “Why don’t I feel a strong bond with my child right away?”), and **other strong emotions**. Being a good parent can be challenging in and of itself, and the issues can be even more complicated and intense after deployment.

Most VA providers have not received specialized training in child development, so these booklets can help you provide research-based information to these questions/concerns.

When a parent talks about his/her children, you may use the preceding questions to explore how parenting is going. You may give the parent the booklet, turning to the section(s) that pertain to his/her specific issues. It can be helpful to read together and discuss the main points presented on the topic, and engage the parent in discussion about how the information applies to his/her family. You may show the parent the resources described at the end of each section in case he/she wants to read further.



There are five booklets corresponding to five age groups. If a parent has a child in more than one age group, please provide booklets with relevant information for each child.



- Infants (0-12 months)
- Toddlers (1– 3 years)
- Preschoolers (3– 5 years)
- Elementary School-age (6-12 years)
- Teenagers (13-18 years)

Each booklet is organized into the following sections:

- Did you know? (Interesting facts about children this age)
- Cognitive, social and physical development
- Reconnecting with children after deployment
- How to talk to your child about deployment
- Strengthening your relationship with your child
- Managing common behavioral challenges
- Red flags for concern
- Taking care of yourself as a parent
- Reconnecting with your partner after deployment and communication tips for couples
- Resource guide



What Is Important for Me To Know When Addressing Parenting Issues?

At this time, the VA healthcare system is not set up to provide individual counseling, testing, or medication management for children. When you discuss parenting issues with your Veterans, you may become aware of child-related issues, so it's important to familiarize yourself with community resources. For example, you may want to explore (and/or talk to a psychologist or social worker about):

- Parenting hotlines
- Referrals to mental health professionals that specialize in working with children
- Parenting support groups and classes

Importantly, you may also learn of issues of child abuse/neglect in these discussions. Please check your state laws (e.g., Call your local reporting hotline or check websites, such as: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/) to determine your reporting responsibilities. In most states, you can call the state reporting hotline and propose a “hypothetical” scenario if you're unsure if the issue needs to be reported. Remember that your job as a mental health professional is to make a report if you SUSPECT abuse/neglect. Your job is NOT to investigate or determine if abuse has occurred.

Resources for Providers

Because parenting may be a newer area for you, you may find some of these resources useful in broadening your understanding of the effects of deployment on children.

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. *Courage to Care, Courage to Talk About War Injuries*. www.couragetotalk.org/index.php

National Military Family Association. *10 Things Military Kids Want You to Know*. www.nmfa.org

Sherman, M.D. & Sherman, D.M. (2009). *My Story: Blogs by Four Military Teens*. Edina, MN: Seeds of Hope Books. www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com

ZERO TO THREE. (2009). *Honoring our Babies and Toddlers: Supporting Young Children Affected by a Military Parent's Deployment, Injury, or Death*. Washington, DC: Author.

www.ZeroToThree.org

Thank You for Your Commitment to our Veterans' Families and Children!