



# Separation and Deployment

Supporting babies and very young children in  
Armed Forces families

## Introduction

When a parent or loved one is away due to service commitments, family life can feel different – even for the youngest children. Babies, toddlers and preschool-aged children may not fully comprehend the reasons for a parent's absence. However, they are highly attuned to changes in caregiving, daily routines and relationships. These changes can influence how secure and settled they feel during both separation and reunion.

Babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers experience separation and reunion differently from older children. In the early years, children make sense of the world through their relationships, daily routines and how safe and secure they feel emotionally, with their ability to use language and explanations developing over time. Because very young children do not yet understand time, a parent's absence can feel sudden or confusing. They cannot hold the idea of "Daddy will be home in two weeks" or "Mummy is away for work." Instead, they are more likely to respond to and show how they feel in the present moment through changes in behaviour, sleep, feeding or emotional regulation than through words. When the parent returns, children may feel a mixture of excitement, joy, uncertainty or overwhelm. Reunions can also temporarily disrupt routines as the child readjusts to having the parent back in their everyday world.

Over time, models have been developed to help families and professionals understand the emotional changes that can occur before, during and after deployment. One such model was developed by Kathleen Vestal Logan in the late 1980s to support naval families. While service life has changed since then, deployments continue to involve significant periods of separation and reunion.

Today, deployments vary in length, frequency and predictability across the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Despite these differences, this way of thinking remains helpful in understanding how deployment can affect family life. Each deployment is unique, and children and adults will respond in their own ways. Emotional and behavioural responses may shift over time and will look different for every child. Recognising this enables families and professionals to respond with empathy, reassurance and consistency.

Children of reservists may also experience deployment-related separation from a parent. They can share the same worries and anxieties about their parent's safety during deployment. However, they are often less likely to receive targeted support, as deployments may be less regular and these children are not always identified as being part of a forces family.

It is equally important to show understanding towards the parent who remains at home, as they will be managing the practical and emotional demands of solo parenting; maintaining open, respectful communication between the family and early years settings can help ensure that support is responsive to the family's individual circumstances. This leaflet provides a brief overview focused on babies and very young children, and how Early Years practitioners can support them and their families during periods of separation and deployment. We recognise that you know your children and families best. This resource is intended to offer additional context and insight, complementing – not replacing – the knowledge, relationships and professional judgement already held within families and early years settings.

*Forces Children Scotland and Early Years Scotland would like to acknowledge the valuable work of the Naval Families Federation, which has helped inform aspects of this resource.*

## Understanding separation in the early years: attachment and development

Babies and very young children make sense of the world through the people who care for them. Their relationships with parents and primary caregivers form the foundation of early brain development, emotional regulation and secure attachment. When a parent is away due to service commitments, even when the remaining caregivers provide warmth and stability, young children can still experience changes that are deeply felt in their bodies, behaviour and emotions.

### Attachment and brain development in the first years

In the early years, babies and toddlers rely on consistent, responsive caregiving to feel safe. A parent's sudden absence—even when expected by adults—can disrupt a child's sense of predictability. Because young children cannot yet use language or time concepts to understand where their parent has gone or when they will return, their responses are often expressed physically and behaviourally rather than verbally.



**'That's daddy in his Army stuff,  
when's he coming home?'**  
Sophie, Age 5

Common responses may include:

- changes in sleep, feeding or toileting
- clinginess with familiar adults or distress at separation
- increased crying or frustration
- heightened sensitivity to changes in routines.

These are not signs of “misbehaviour” but natural expressions of stress in a developing nervous system. They show a child’s need for connection, reassurance and emotional self-regulation.

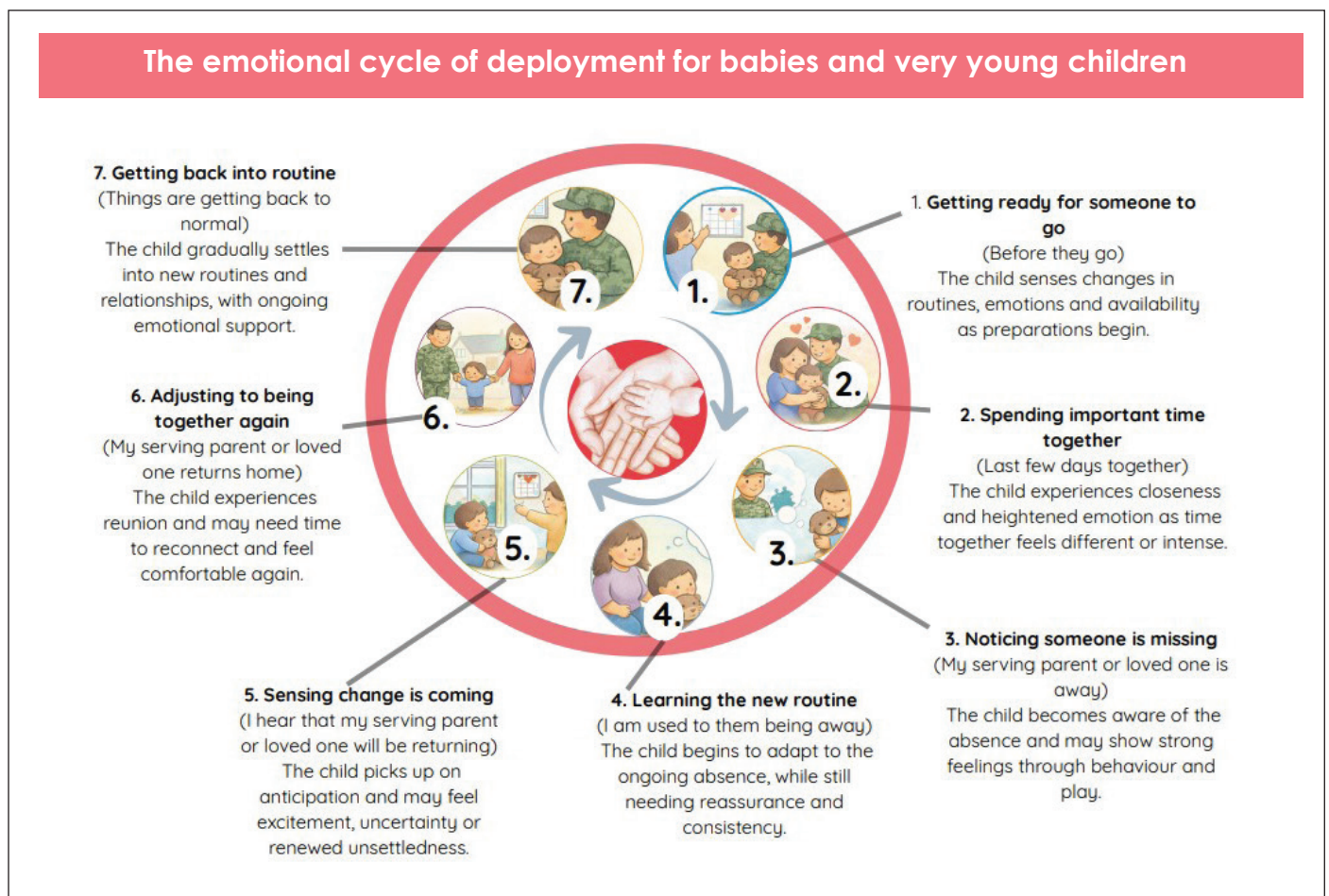
## The role of familiar routines and secure relationships

Babies and very young children understand safety through what is familiar. When a parent is away, the stability of everyday routines and warm, attuned interactions help maintain a child’s sense of security. Predictable caregiving helps the child’s brain manage stress and supports healthy attachment patterns, even when family circumstances are changing.

For some children, the temporary absence of a parent may lead to stronger attachments to other familiar caregivers, including keyworkers, grandparents, or siblings. For others, the stress of separation may appear later—sometimes closer to the time of reunion—when the child senses relationships changing again.

## The impact of separation on the remaining parent

It is also important to recognise the impact on the parent who remains at home. They may be adjusting to the absence of their partner while managing the practical and emotional demands of parenting alone, sometimes without the support of nearby family or established networks. This period can be particularly demanding and isolating. Practitioners should approach families with empathy and sensitivity, creating space for open dialogue to better understand each family’s specific circumstances and strengths. Every family’s experience is unique, and support should be responsive to their individual needs rather than based on assumptions.



Stage of Deployment	What Practitioners May Observe	Supportive Strategies for ELC Settings
1. Getting ready for someone to go  (1 to 1.5 months before a deployment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Babies and young children often react to the emotions around them, and their behaviour may change when they sense their parents' feelings and their awareness of something important coming up.</li> <li>Increased emotional dependence.</li> <li>Subtle changes in sleep or regulation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain predictable routines.</li> <li>Build familiarity with trusted adults.</li> <li>Approach families with empathy and flexibility, recognising that responsibilities may change when a parent is deployed.</li> <li>Provide simple, reassuring information that helps children understand what will stay the same and what will be new.</li> </ul>
2. Spending important time together  (last few dates before the serving person leaves)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Heightened emotional responses or mood swings</li> <li>Increased separation anxiety at drop-off</li> <li>Younger children may appear unsettled but are unable to explain why</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep routines predictable and consistent.</li> <li>Be mindful of how questions or discussions about deployment are introduced, offer gentle opportunities for children to express feelings whilst also allowing them to stay absorbed in play and everyday routines.</li> <li>Offer calm reassurance.</li> <li>Encourage parents to inform staff of changes</li> </ul>
3. Noticing someone is missing  (few days after the serving person has left)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased emotional sensitivity including tearfulness, outbursts or withdrawing from others.</li> <li>Changes in sleep or appetite</li> <li>Regression in toileting, independence or confidence</li> <li>Children may search for or ask about the absent parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be a calm, emotionally available safe base.</li> <li>Reduce emotional demands on the child.</li> <li>Use simple, family-agreed language when referring to the serving parent.</li> <li>Ensure the setting is a calm, supportive space where they can take time and regulate.</li> </ul>
4. Learning the new routine  (Starting in the second month after departure)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Behaviour may appear more settled, though emotions can fluctuate</li> <li>Strong attachment to key staff may form.</li> <li>Some children appear confident while others remain anxious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide consistency through trusted adults, familiar routines and clear expectations.</li> <li>Recognise that children may show different attachment needs at different times.</li> <li>Support early peer relationships to build a sense of safety, belonging and community.</li> <li>Use visual supports to help with time worries (e.g. who is collecting them)</li> <li>Rather than describing a child as 'resilient,' focus on recognising and validating the child's ongoing emotional effort.</li> </ul>
5. Sensing change is coming  (Between one and two months before the return)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Renewed emotional dysregulation.</li> <li>Increased questions or worries, especially around time and change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow the family's lead on how much information to share.</li> <li>Use attachment informed approaches to help children understand changes in simple, developmentally appropriate ways.</li> <li>Avoid overloading children with details that may increase anxiety.</li> <li>Use visual and play-based tools (maps, photos, storybooks)</li> <li>Continue steady routines</li> </ul>
6. Adjusting to being together Again  (Shortly after the serving parent returns home)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mixed responses — excitement, avoidance or rejection of returning parent.</li> <li>Increased reliance on the primary caregiver</li> <li>Emotional sensitivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep ongoing open communication with families to share observations and a shared understanding of how children may show changes in behaviour.</li> <li>Allow time for relationships to rebuild naturally.</li> <li>Maintain nursery routines as a stabilising factor.</li> <li>Offer emotional regulation strategies and quiet spaces</li> </ul>
7. Getting back into routine  (Around 1 to 1.5 months after the serving parent returns - this could be longer, depending on <a href="#">the nature</a> of the deployment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual settling, though changes may still surface</li> <li>More balanced expectations of caregivers over time</li> <li>Delayed reactions may appear weeks later</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue emotionally attuned practice.</li> <li>Support one-to-one time and positive play.</li> <li>Recognise and understand that adjusting to change takes time and some children may require ongoing reassurance.</li> <li>Maintain open communication with parents</li> </ul>

This table outlines common behaviours that early years practitioners may observe at different stages of deployment and practical strategies that can help support babies, toddlers and preschoolers from Armed Forces families. The guidance reflects a tri-service context and draws on co-produced insights from Early Years Scotland, parents and practitioners across Scotland.

## Frameworks used within early years settings to support attachment and development

Service-related separation fits naturally within existing frameworks used within Early Years settings where relationships, nurture and wellbeing are at the crux of everything they do to support young children and their families.

Some of these include:

### [GIRFEC \(Getting It Right For Every Child\)](#)

GIRFEC emphasises understanding each child's wellbeing in context. A parent's deployment can influence several wellbeing indicators, especially:

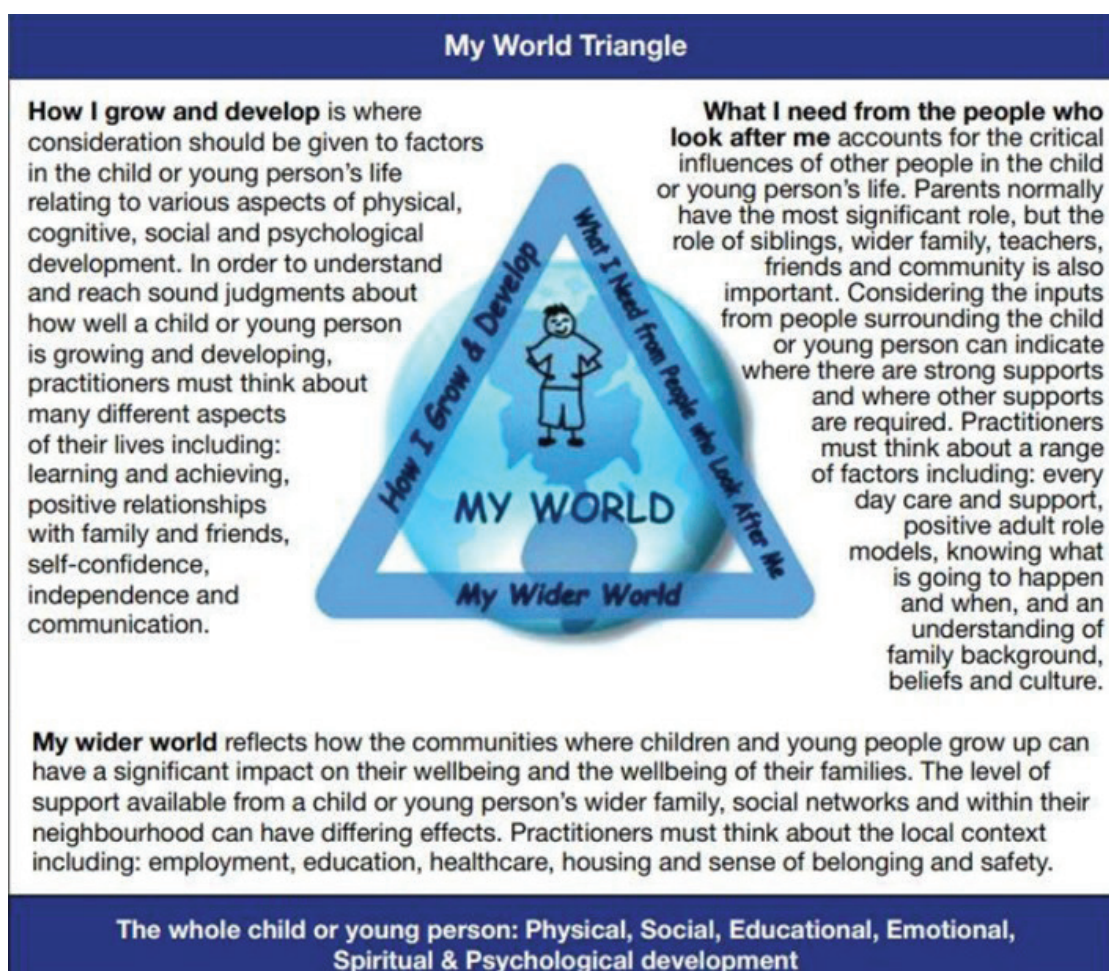
SAFE — maintaining emotional safety during changes.

NURTURED — ensuring consistent, comforting caregiving.

ACHIEVING — supporting learning when stress affects development.

INCLUDED — recognising the experiences of Armed Forces families.

The [My World Triangle](#) can be used to understand changes in relationships, routines and the wider family environment.



### [Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#)

This guidance highlights the importance of:

- Positive and responsive relationships
- Self-regulation
- Playful interactions
- Understanding behaviour as communication

Children experiencing parental separation due to deployment often need enhanced self regulation, predictable routines, and strong keyworker relationships. Realising the Ambition encourages practitioners to notice subtle cues from infants and respond sensitively, which is essential during periods of separation and reunion.

## UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)

Early childhood is a critical period for realising children’s rights. Their beliefs about their rights, needs, how they should be treated, and their role in their family and community are all shaped in these years. Young children can be more adversely affected by periods of separation because of their physical dependence on and emotional attachment to their parents/primary caregivers. They are also less able to comprehend the circumstances of any separation.

As a result, early years practice needs to be grounded in children’s rights, including:

- the right to maintain relationships with parents (Article 9)
- the right for parents to be supported in their parenting (Article 18)
- the right to have a say in the decisions that affect them and for this to be given due weight (Article 12)
- for babies and toddlers, “expressing views” happens through behaviour, emotions and interactions (Article 13). Practitioners play a key role in interpreting and responding to this communication.

It can be easy to assume that because babies and very young children are “too young to remember” or “too little to understand,” their experiences have limited impact. In reality, early experiences shape children’s sense of safety, trust and belonging, forming the foundation for later development and wellbeing. This is particularly relevant during periods of deployment and separation, when changes in family life may be deeply felt even if they are not verbally expressed.

Taking children’s feelings and experiences seriously from the very beginning affirms their rights as individuals. Embedding a rights-based approach in the earliest years—through attentive listening, responsive caregiving and respectful relationships—helps establish the expectation that children’s voices, needs and experiences matter, supporting the continued realisation of their rights as they grow.

## Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning and Childcare Sectors

The new **Quality Improvement Framework** highlights high quality practice through four key areas that place children’s rights, wellbeing and relationships at the centre of ELC provision. Some themes within these key areas include:

- **Nurturing Care** — nurturing relationships are essential for children’s growth and development. Warm, consistent and responsive care is paramount for babies and young children to feel safe, secure and understood.
- **Positive Relationships and Wellbeing** - Children’s wellbeing is supported through attuned interactions, self regulation and emotionally rich environments.
- **Connections with Families** — Working collaboratively and having a robust communication system in place allows a deeper understanding of each child’s family circumstances, including the unique experiences of Armed Forces families facing separation.
- **Partnerships** - Working in partnership with parents and carers is essential to ensure consistent communication, continuity of care and shared approaches to supporting the child.

Deployments are an important family factor that settings should recognise and plan for. Sensitive communication, thoughtful transitions and consistent caregiving help maintain security and stability for babies and very young children during periods of parental separation.

## **Why this matters**

When Early Years practitioners understand the attachment and developmental impact of separation, they can respond with empathy rather than viewing behaviours as challenging or unexpected. Small, consistent actions—warm transitions, stable routines, predictable adults, space for big feelings, and close partnership with families—can make a significant difference to a young child navigating a parent’s deployment.

## EYS resources

[Building Brains for Healthy Futures](#) (mini self-study course)

[Behaviour: Supporting Positive Relationships](#) (mini self-study course)

[Who Do We Think We Are? Scottish Early Years Practitioners' Perceptions of Their Role and Purpose](#) (In-person event)

[Understanding Young Brains and Early Environments](#) — (exclusive video recording)

## Additional learning resources

[Early Years Support with Dr Marg Rogers](#) (online webinar discussing the impact of armed forces life within the Early Years)

[Research team — Child and Family Resilience Programs](#) (Free, award-winning, evidence-based resources and personalised programs for children from Defence (Military), Veteran, First Responder & Remote Worker (FIFO & DIDO) families)

[Naval Family Federation - Parental Absence Guide](#) (information about parental absence and separation and provide some strategies to help families thrive.)



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