

Max's Big Move

Written with children and young people from armed forces families

Illustrated by Catherine Lindow



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 **THE ARMED FORCES
COVENANT FUND TRUST**



Supporting armed forces
children & young people

'My Dad served in the army for 24 years and I've lived in 10 houses; my biggest move in all the moves I'd done previously (9 in total) was in November 2021 when my dad retired. I am very grateful for all the support he received from various organisations when he left the forces. However, there was no support for my mum or my siblings and me. We found ourselves cast out from the community we were once a part of, and I left behind the life I had always known. So, in 2022 I jumped at the opportunity to be part of the coproduction group for the Tornado of Change campaign which raises awareness about the experiences of children and young people when their parent leaves the armed forces. I'm extremely proud of the campaign which highlights the need for support for children and young people whose parent is leaving the forces.

Max's Big Move was created from the experiences we shared during the campaign. I hope the book will help Early Years practitioners and parents talk to younger children about the big changes when their parent leaves the forces. Come on a journey with Max where he leaves service family accommodation on the patch and settles into his new house and school.'

- Sophia, forum member.

Foreword

In my role as Scottish Veterans Commissioner, I have been privileged to meet with young people from veteran families who are being supported by Forces Children Scotland.

They told me that when their parent leaves the armed forces, they can experience a sense of loss, such as a loss of identity, loss of friends and the loss of being part of a community. They feel that the adults in their lives, such as teachers, can have a poor understanding of what it means to be a child from a veteran family.

In 'Max's Big Move', Forces Children Scotland have listened to the voices of children and young people and created a story that explores what the move from serving to veteran feels like from a child's perspective. As a learning resource, it provides strategies to support children before, during and after this move.

As a parent or educator, you can use this book to create a safe environment for children to think and talk about their experience. The book encourages children to know that what they are thinking and feeling is okay and helps them to understand what is happening.

I hope that 'Max's Big Move' becomes a much-valued resource in supporting children to feel seen and understood and in giving adults ideas and strategies to support them. I hope that it helps the needs of children and young people from armed forces and veteran families be better understood by education, health and social care providers.

Susie Hamilton, Lieutenant Commander (retired), Scottish Veterans Commissioner.

Main
Characters :

Max

Loves playing on
the swings.



Mum

Has been in the army for
15 years.
Loves playing the drums.



Hame'ish

Max's favourite toy who goes
everywhere with him.
He's Forces Children
Scotland's
mascot for children and
young people.



Dad

Runs his own business working
from home.

Loves long walks.



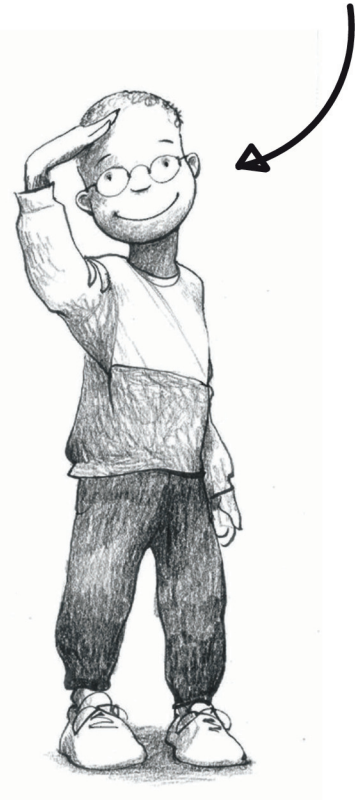
Sammy the dog

Loves muddy puddles.



Ben

Loves playing with cars.



Max is from an armed forces family.
It's all he has ever known.

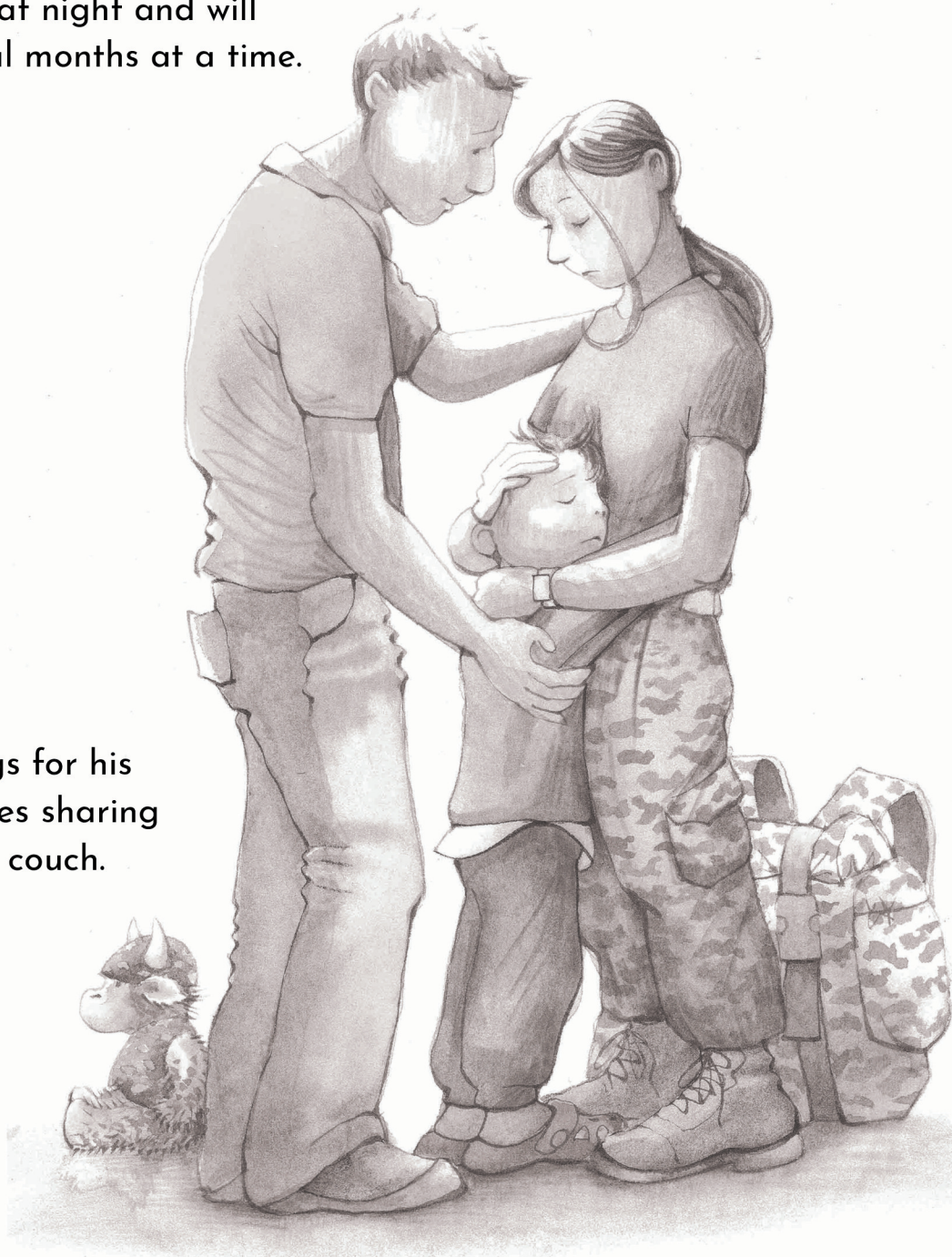
His mum is a soldier.
Every two years they move to
somewhere new.





Max's mum sometimes goes away with the Army.
She doesn't come home at night and will
often be gone for several months at a time.

At those times Max longs for his
mum's cuddles and misses sharing
popcorn with her on the couch.



Max knows his mum has a very important job to do. He and Dad are very proud of her for being so brave, and they know how hard she works to keep everyone safe. But Max is sad when she leaves. He wishes Mum could stay with them a little longer.




One nice thing about Max's mum being away is that he gets to spend a lot more time with his dad.

Dad is great at making him feel safe and sound. They do lots of fun activities together. Max can talk to Dad about anything that might be worrying him.



Most of all they talk about Mum,
and all the fun things they will do
with her when she gets home.





All the families where Max lives have mums
or dads serving in the armed forces.
Their neighbourhood is called a patch.

Lots of Max's friends live on the patch. It
feels safe and secure here. Every week,
they meet their friends on the patch for
dinner or for a play at the park.



The best thing about being on the patch is that Max always has a friend next door. He can walk outside and find somebody to play with or talk to. Everyone is welcoming to new families, and everyone understands that you might have to move to a new patch when your parent has to serve in a new place.





Dad has support on the patch too - he isn't alone.
He often joins other families for a coffee and
catch up. Everyone understands that being
separated is tough. Life on the patch feels good.

One day, whilst mum is away on a training exercise, Max has some bad news. Mum has hurt her leg. She has to go to a medical centre to be looked after properly.

The Army doctors give her lots of support, and in time she makes a full recovery.



Mum is happy that she has recovered.

But she is also very sad because the doctors have said she can no longer be a soldier. This is to keep her safe and to protect her from hurting her leg again.



Mum has something to tell Max. As she is no longer a soldier they will have to move away and leave the patch. The time has come to find a different house and somewhere new to live.

Everyone is upset about leaving their friends.

But this is a new adventure with new places to explore.

What will it be like?



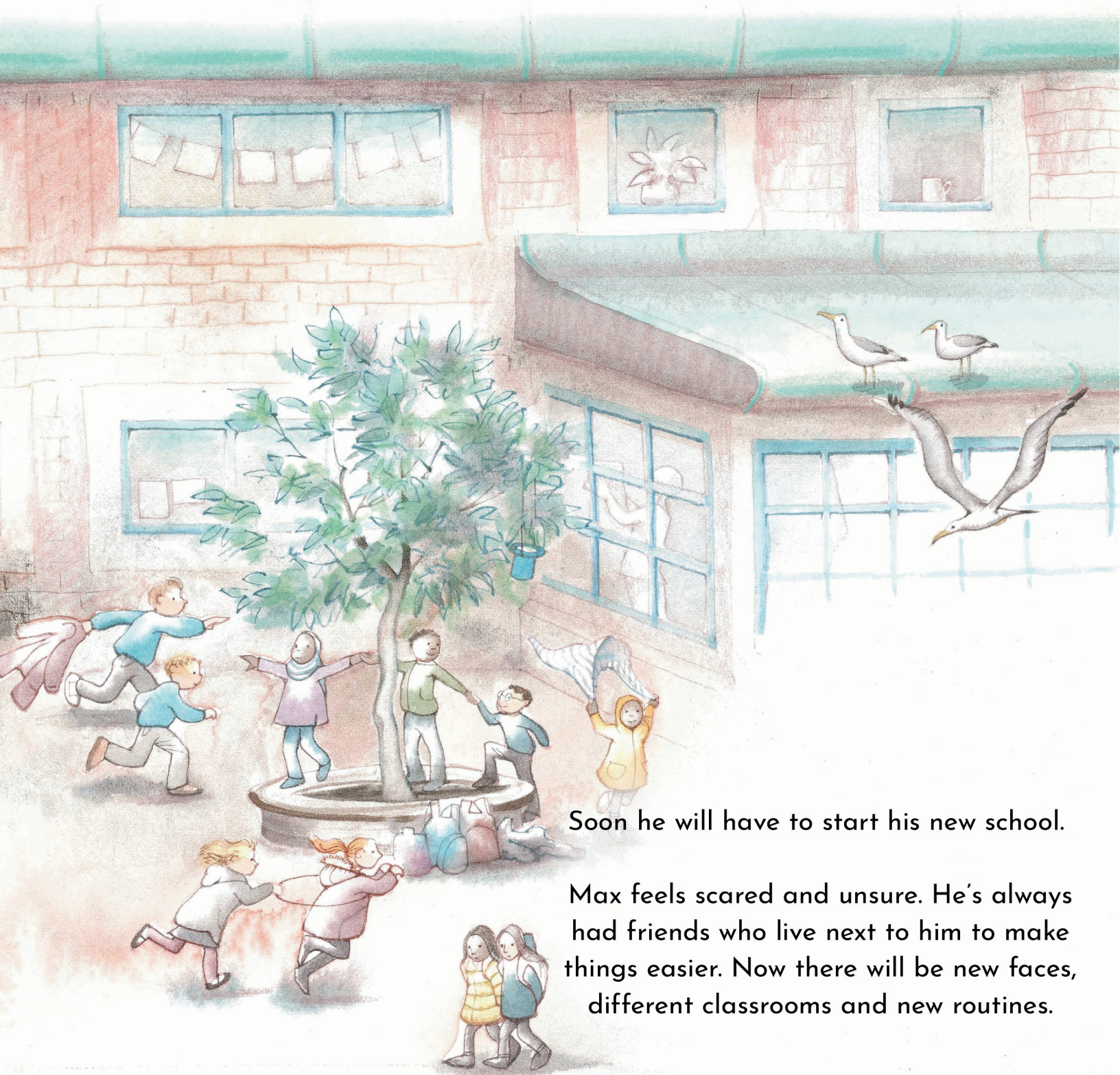


But after they move, Max is worried. His old friends aren't living next door. The children living near him just don't get it. They all have different accents, and none of them have lived on a patch before. They don't even know what a patch is!









Soon he will have to start his new school.

Max feels scared and unsure. He's always had friends who live next to him to make things easier. Now there will be new faces, different classrooms and new routines.



At school, he wanders the playground alone.

Everyone seems to have a friend.

But then he hears footsteps behind him...

A boy, Ben, is there.

Ben explains that the teacher told him that
Max had come from an armed forces family.
And Ben has too!

Ben tells Max about the patch he lived on,
and all about his dad who served in the navy.
Ben's dad didn't go away often, but he was
very busy and had lots of special events to
attend. He had to wear a fancy uniform!



Ben shows Max around the school while they talk.

It's great to find someone who understands how it feels to have a parent who has served in the Forces, and the two boys find they know lots of friends in common!



Ben talks about how he felt when his dad left the navy, and all the things that helped him to feel better about his new life.

This helps Max to share the feelings that he is having.

He starts to think that perhaps there might be good things here after all.



Max starts to feel more confident and finds new friends.

They might all have different backgrounds and come from different places, but they all play the same games, go to the same school and enjoy talking together.



There is a lot to enjoy about living here.
But their old life on the patch will always feel special to Max and his family.



Why this story matters...

The Centre for Social Justice (2016): Military Families and Transitions.

This report found that when a family leaves the military, it can be hard. Families can help a lot during this time. They can make the change feel less. A parent who doesn't serve, might keep working to earn money and make a loving home.

Being in the military can be stressful. This stress can cause problems in families and make children feel upset. Parents might feel very sad, angry, or worried after being in combat and this can make it hard for everyone in the family.

It helps when families can talk to someone about their feelings. Places like Family Hubs, where families can get help and advice, should be easy to find and use, even after families move away from the military base.

Chappell, A., McHugh, E., Ince, C., Bhuyan, M. (2025): 'Grown Up' Children from Military Families Report: reflections on experiences of childhood and education, Brunel University of London.

When grown-up children who used to be in military families looked back, they said it was really hard when their parent left the Armed Forces. Their parent got help, but the children didn't. No one outside the family really helped or gave them advice, so they had to figure things out on their own.

When a parent leaves the Armed Forces, it can be a big change for their children. Some children felt happy because their family moved less, and life felt steadier. But others feel sad or alone because they miss old friends and don't get much help with the change. Every child feels the change differently—even brothers and sisters in the same family. Some feel better, while others find it hard. Many children say they don't get enough support and feel left to handle things like new schools all by themselves.

Smart, D., Muir, S., & Daraganova, G. (2018): Family Wellbeing Study: Summary Report. Canberra: Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs

After leaving the service, many families experience more stability in terms of moving and education. This study states that 2-17-year-olds in ex-service families were not likely to show more behaviour problems than the general population apart from peer problems. Families may encounter challenges when the ex-service person tries to find employment in the civilian world, or the family had moved away from extended family. Families said targeted support would be beneficial for the family during transition.

Some families may have money problems after leaving the military. They might have trouble getting loans or using credit. Some may get into debt or gamble too much.

Families leaving the military need support with jobs, money, and feelings. Getting the right help makes life easier for everyone in the family, especially children.

Selous, A., Walker, J., Misca, G. (2020): Living in Our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families, Ministry of Defence.

This report focuses only on those still in the Armed Forces and doesn't include families who have already left, nor children or young people. It highlights how military families move frequently, and that fewer or better-planned moves could make transitions easier when leaving the military. Families who prepare ahead for civilian life tend to have smoother transitions, although some may need extra help.

There's a lack of understanding about how leaving the military impacts children and young people. Families often experience mixed emotions when leaving the Armed Forces, such as happiness, sadness, excitement, pride, or worry. These feelings are common, and the partner who didn't serve may feel more uncertain about the future.

Sometimes, service members don't communicate available support, which makes things harder for their families. Families play a crucial role in helping the person who served adjust to civilian life, so they should be part of the planning process. Families who lived on a military base may feel isolated once they leave, missing the friends and support they had. Even when ready to leave, many service members feel a sense of loss due to the unique experiences the military provided

Halkiopoulos, S., Makinson, L., Heal, J. (2018): Improving transition out of the Armed Forces: engaging families through behavioural insights: The Behavioural Insights Team.

This research uses behavioral psychology to look at how ex-service personnel and their families seek support during the transition to civvy street. Services must be easy to access, not have too many choices, and be appealing to ex-service people and their families. It is important to identify key moments to present support to families and children and young people.

Heal, J., Crouch, L., Halkiopoulos, S., Fussey, V., Kirkman, E. (2018): Applying behavioural insights to successful transition: Improving transition out of the Armed Forces: engaging families through behavioural insights.

Leaving the armed forces can feel big and stressful for the whole family. It is important to make these changes as easy as we can for the whole family. Families can feel worried because there is so much to think about. They need help to break things into small, easy steps.

Services should help families choose what they want to talk about, get advice that fits their needs, and meet other people who are going through the same thing. Families who plan ahead often know better what they want and what they need.

Right now, families do not get much information about the transition. It is important that this information is given to the whole family, not just the serving person. Families also need more places where they can get help and learn what to expect.

We must remember that transition does not stop the day a family leaves. They should still be able to get support afterwards.

Office for Veterans' Affairs: Services and Support, responses from family members of UK armed forces veterans: Veterans' Survey 2022, UK (2025):

This survey heard from family members of UK Veterans. This included children of veterans, all of whom were adults when they took part and for most, their parent had left the forces a long time before. It asked the question: "Can you tell us what services and support would be helpful for you are a veteran's family member but it currently lacking?" The answers included support for family members during the transition from military to civilian life, knowing how to access support and information, and more understanding of the impact armed forces life has on the wellbeing of family members. They said that local services offering community or peer support for families would help.

Community and Relationships: Anything but Uniform (2024): Scottish Veterans Commissioner

Many children from military families are confident and good at coping with change. But moving from a military family to a veteran family can still be hard. Some young people feel left out of the transition and may have to move away from their home, school, and friends. Teachers and others may not always understand what life in a military family is like, and some young people might need special support that isn't always easy to get.

Young people say transition can feel like a big loss—losing friends, their identity, and the strong "military family" community they are proud of. They also face challenges at school and with services that don't always understand what being a veteran means. Some children may have lost someone or care for a parent who is injured or unwell because of service.

Moving to a new place can feel lonely, especially when people don't understand military life. Young people say it helps a lot to talk to others who have been through the same things. Their voices should be listened to when making decisions, and schools, health, and social care services need to understand their needs better. Families—including children—should be included in all support for veterans.

Simple activities to engage children after the initial story reading:

How many times can you find Hame'ish in the story?

How many marshmallows are being toasted?

Draw a picture of what you think Max will do next in his new place.

Extended activities:

"My New Home" Craft

Activity: Provide paper houses or boxes for children to decorate as their "new home." They can draw or glue pictures of who/what they'd like to take if they moved.

Extension: Talk about what makes a home feel special.

"Pack a Bag Like Max":

Provide various objects (toy toothbrush, book, toy car, etc.). Children choose what Max should pack for his move.

Discussion: "What's important to take?" "What could stay behind?"

"Max's journey to his new home":

Children use their imagination to follow Max's journey to his new home. Did he have to go through a tunnel, over a bridge or past woods on the journey?

Activity: Set up a simple obstacle course that follows Max's "journey" – crawl under a table (tunnel), jump over a cushion (river), tiptoe past "woods" (plants).

Acknowledgements

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When his mum has to leave her job as a soldier, Max has to get used to a world outside their Forces community.

How will he adapt?

