

The Waypoint

A guide for the parents of teens experiencing an absence



Valcartier
Military Family
Resource Centre

INTRODUCTION

Although teenagers are generally more mature and therefore better equipped than younger children when it comes to adapting to absences related to military life, it is still important for parents and other significant adults to be attentive to their needs and, above all, to be available to support them.

“The Waypoint” is a guide to help parents understand the reactions of their teens who are experiencing an absence and to implement the strategies and practices best suited to their reality.

Need further support? Please feel free to contact an Absence Support Team worker. Happy reading!



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THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT

Absence, whether due to a deployment or not, is a transitional situation that monopolizes the coping skills of all family members, who will go through the stages illustrated below in their own respective ways.

ANTICIPATION OF LOST

1 to 6 weeks prior to deployment

Tension, agitation, anger, frustration, hyperactivity, guilt, anxiety, sadness.

- *We know it well; your work is more important than your family.*
- *Is the mission risky?*
- *He'll miss my hockey season! He won't be there for my prom!*

REINTEGRATION AND STABILIZATION

6 to 12 weeks after return to Canada

Redefinition of roles, a sense of being a couple again, complicity, peace, warmth.

- *I'm glad to have him back!*
- *It's not quite the same as before, but that's okay!*

DETACHMENT AND WITHDRAWAL

Final week prior to deployment

Lack of energy, lack of concentration, fatigue, discouragement, appearance of disinterest, anxiety, sleep disorder, little discussion of feelings, resentment, guilt.

- *Why would I spend time with him? He's the one who decided to leave!*



RENEGOTIATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

6 weeks after return to Canada

Uncertainty, isolation, anxiety appearance of fatigue, frustration, resentment, avoidance, denial, reluctance, malaise, friction, questioning, needing time to get reacquainted.

- *Wow, it seems like he's been gone a long time!*
- *It's a bit strange to have one more person in the house!*

EMOTIONAL CONFUSION

First 6 weeks of deployment

Lack of concentration, anxiety, overly emotional, sleep problems, guilt, loss of productivity, confusion, disorganization, indecision, irritability, little or no desire to see friends or family.

- *It's difficult for me to adapt to our new reality.*
- *I usually turn to him when I need to talk!*
- *It's not the same at home; we feel kind of lost!*

ANTICIPATION OF RETURN

6 weeks prior to return

Restlessness, excessive energy, excitement, impulsivity, euphoria, nervousness, anxiety, apprehension, questioning.

- *I hope it won't disrupt our routine.*
- *Has he changed?*
- *I hope I'll keep my new privileges!*

ADJUSTMENT AND STABILIZATION

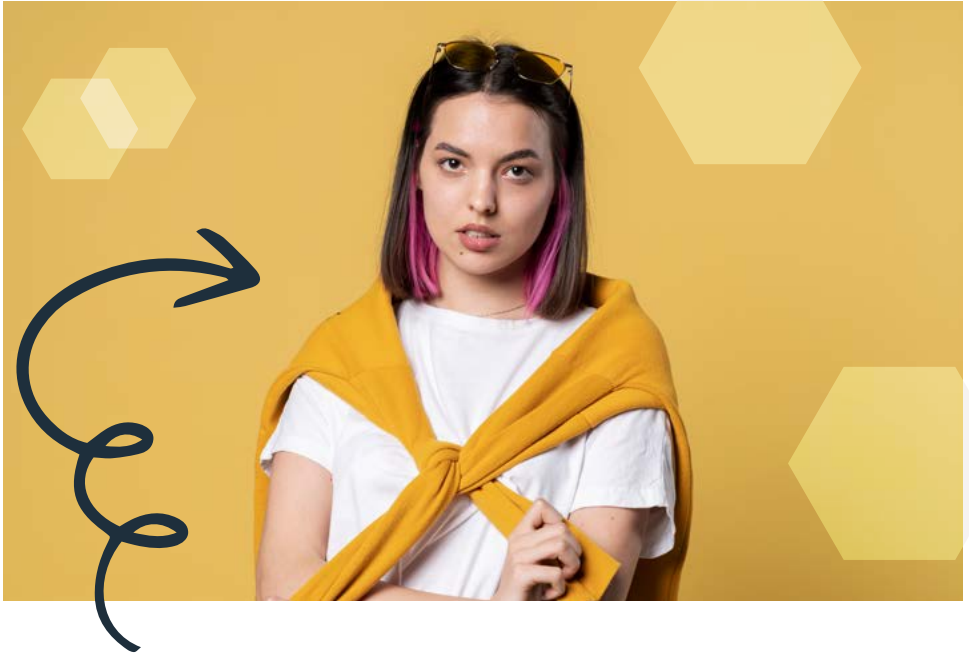
Variable duration

Relaxation, acceptance, joy, openness, less emotional, caring, more committed, more comfortable with the family reorganization, sense of well-being.

- *It's cool to be able to talk to each other often!*
- *I love the new routine with mom!*

Different ways your child might react

- Isolating themselves, being closed to discussing their emotions, avoiding the subject;
- Being more irritable, emotional or impulsive;
- Experiencing stress-related situations (e.g., panic attacks, insomnia);
- Experiencing academic impacts;
- Giving even more space to their friends, since they represent stability in the context of adaptation linked to the absence;
- Etc.



UNDERSTANDING MY TEEN'S REACTIONS

Adolescence and turmoil

It is easy to fall into the trap of “aging” your teenager and attributing them a maturity that they have not yet acquired, in part because young people grow up at an incredible rate and quickly start to look like adults. However, social-emotional and physical development are not always simultaneous. Your teen may seem to have childish reactions, but in fact they are perfectly normal for their age.

Adolescence itself is a time of turmoil. Thus, several things can explain why the relationship with your teen could be more difficult at the moment: the context of an absence itself, but also their need for autonomy, changes in their body or events that occur in their environment (e.g., a break-up, conflict in their group of friends, bullying, performance anxiety, grades, etc.).

Factors that may influence a teen's reactions

Several personal and environmental elements will shape your teen's reactions to the absence. Also, every absence is different, your teen may react more strongly to the current or upcoming absence, even if this was not the case in the past. Here are the key factors that may influence a teen's reactions to an absence or transition:

- Personal characteristics (e.g., age, social-emotional maturity, temperament, values, coping skills, emotional management, etc.);
- Previous experiences or lack of experience related to an absence (and how they occurred). It could also be that a certain fatigue sets in with accumulated absences, as it does for parents;
- Parents' attitudes and characteristics (as a parent, you are the role model for your teen, and your child tends to unconsciously reproduce your behaviours);
- Nature of the current relationship between the teen and the departing parent, as well as the remaining parent or even the step-parent. This could play into the anticipation and apprehension about the absence;
- Relationships of the remaining parent with grandparents, ex-spouses, etc., who could serve as a support network during the absence;
- Social network (present or not, supportive or not, do they have friends experiencing the same thing? How are they integrated into their community? Are you new to the area?);
- Other environmental factors (e.g., educational background, employment, extracurricular activities, etc.);
- Operational context of the mission (e.g., duration, location, danger, etc.);
- Your own reaction to the upcoming absence and how you approach it with your teen.



PREPARING THE ABSENCE

The announcement

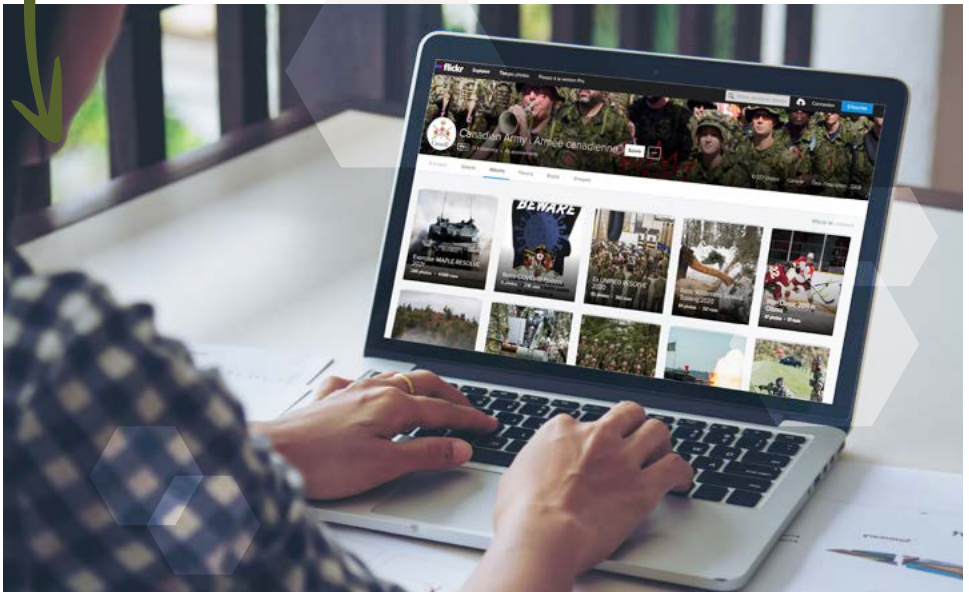
There is no single way to announce an absence; it's all about doing it in a way that is comfortable for you. Here are certain elements that could guide you:

- Make the announcement as soon as possible, give your teen time to prepare and to allow them to ask questions.
- Be transparent and tell the truth (location of the mission, duration, level of risk, possible changes, whether the departure is confirmed or not, whether you are on reserve, etc.). Remember that your teenager is insightful, but also that they may imagine their own scenarios if you leave them in the dark.
- Use language that they understand.
- Choose the right time to make the announcement (e.g., don't do it before an exam, when you're in a hurry or before going to bed at night); your teen needs enough time to react and ask their questions.

Preparing the departure

The way you prepare the absence may have a significant impact on its outcome. Here are a few suggestions:

- Involve your teen in the preparations. It is a good way for them to integrate the process and feel considered:
 - › If they want to, they can help you pack;
 - › Would you like to have a party, dinner or event with your family before the departure? Your teen could have a say in the type of event and help organize it.
- Give your teen a good overview of everything that will take place before the departure (training, courses, outdoor exercises, etc.).
- Tell your teen where the mission is taking place and explain the role of the military; you can look at photos of certain operations in different locations:
 - › <http://combatcamera.forces.gc.ca/site/index-eng.asp>
 - › <https://www.flickr.com/photos/canadianarmy/albums>
 - › On Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/CanadianForces/>
 - › On the mission Facebook pages



- Young people see a lot of fairly realistic violent images in video games, TV series and movies. Drawing parallels can be an interesting way to prevent your teen from letting their imagination run wild and creating their own false scenarios.

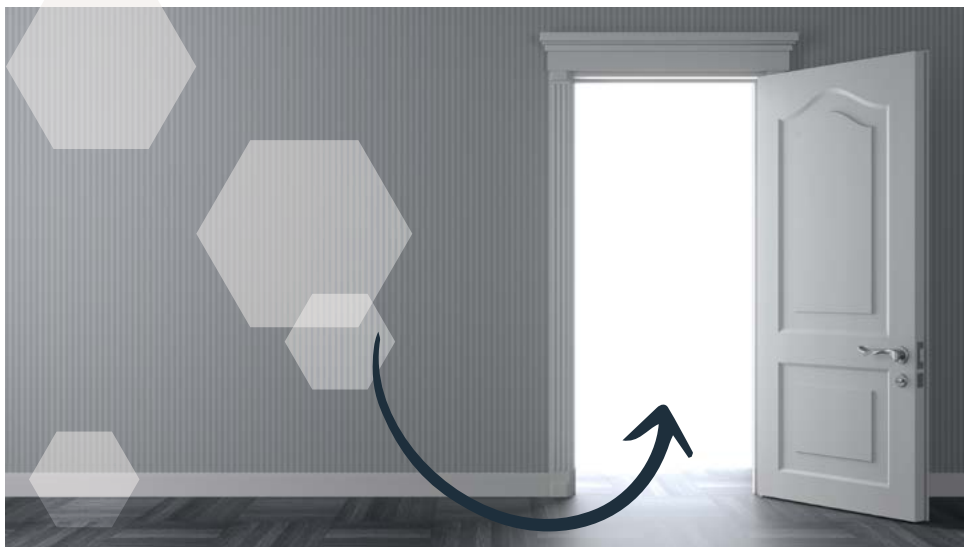
- What special activity would your teen like to do with their military parent before the departure?
- If you have more than one child, plan individual quality time with each one.
- How will the departure work? Talking with your teen and involving them in decisions will help them ease into the transition.
- Be transparent about your own emotions related to the absence. It's alright to cry in front of your child; this will allow them to express their emotions as well. However, it is important that the adult remains in control so as not to create feelings of insecurity in the teen.
- Avoid unnecessarily embellishing the situation to try to convince your teen that everything is positive.



- Do you plan to give your teen some responsibilities during the absence? Start doing so in advance to create a habit before the absence.
- Give your teen reasonable, age-appropriate tasks. Giving teenagers too much responsibility can be stressful and counterproductive, even though it is expected that teens will help their parent in a situation of absence; you are still the parent.
- Avoid changing your expectations too often along the way. This could be destabilizing.
- Also, avoid language that confers too much responsibility (e.g., "you're the man of the house now," or "you're going to have to set an example and be mature");
- Use the tools at your disposal to prepare your family for the absence (e.g., your MFRC's services, emergency care plan, lists, etc.).

- Set the house rules ahead of time and get your teen involved in developing them. They shouldn't be too different from the current rules, but you may need to leave some out to pace your energy. Give yourself some flexibility. You'll probably have to adjust along the way, which is perfectly normal!
- Notify the school.
- Be open to your teen's ideas for both the preparation and family life during the absence.

SUPPORTING MY TEEN DURING THE ABSENCE



Adolescence is a time when many things can happen socially, family-wise, emotionally, educationally, etc. This roller coaster will happen whether there is an absence or not and regardless of the family's military reality. It may be difficult for you to identify your teen's real needs, especially if they tend to isolate themselves or if they aren't very talkative.

In any case, here are some of the most important steps to take:

- Be available. By being neither too intrusive nor indifferent, you will show your teen that they can turn to you if needed. The goal is to let your teen know that the door is open, not to force them to talk if they don't want to. It can be a good idea to leave a pamphlet, book, or any other information document on the table or on their bed. Parents are in the best position to know what works and what doesn't with their teen!

- Let your teen know that you are there if they need anything, but that they could also talk to someone else, if that would make them more comfortable. The important thing is that your teen can confide in an adult who is important to them, when needed.
- Take an interest in what your teen is doing. For example, "What are you playing? How does it work? Can you show me?"
- Be careful not to age your teen; they will not be more (or less) mature depending on the absence of their military parent.
- You can check with your teen to see what parts of the house they would like to take care of during the absence so that they are more motivated. Explain that if they help with certain tasks, you may have more time to give them rides, do activities, or other things.
- Watch for changes in their behaviour and attitude. Are they more withdrawn or irritable? Do they seem to be eating less or sleeping less?
- Reinforce positive behaviours and accomplishments (e.g., rewarding initiative when doing a task, good behaviour during the week, good grades, etc.).

Management of emotions

Depending on your teen's age, there are some practical tips that can help them express their emotions before and during the absence:

- The member can give a personal item to the teen, and vice versa; each takes care of the other's item and can access it if needed (e.g., teddy bear, a sweater, clothing, a necklace, etc.).
- There are tools that serve as a medium for discussing emotions on a daily basis (e.g., mood scales, thermometers, barometers, etc.). Using them preventively (e.g., discussing how one feels each morning) opens a channel of communication and prevents the build-up of emotions and associated irritability.





Communication during the absence

It is important to maintain contact with the deployed parent (as much as possible) as a family, of course, but also one-on-one. If your teen doesn't talk much to begin with, don't expect them to suddenly start. That being said, it's important to provide opportunities for your teen to feel that the door is open.

- Does your teen have a cell phone or tablet? Great! They will be able to communicate directly with the absent parent, making the communication more personal and special.
- Find alternatives to traditional communication or different options. Be creative! This will allow your teen to choose how they want to proceed.
 - › Remote or offline games
 - › Watching the same series/movies
 - › Reading the same book
 - › Drawing and craft contests
- Your teen may not want to rush to talk to the absent parent. It is important that they feel comfortable and can go at their own pace.

Media coverage

Events related to international conflicts, natural disasters and other elements that may involve our armed forces are highly publicized nowadays. It is fairly easy to imagine completely false and catastrophic scenarios based

on incomplete information relayed by the media. Staying informed while supporting your teen to temper these scenarios can be a challenge, especially if your teen has an anxious temperament. The role of the parent is to stay informed, but also to temper all the information received and to help the teen form a more balanced and realistic idea.

- Supervise media access. (What media does your teen watch or listen to? Are they reliable media?)
- Discuss current events with your teen. Check how they feel about the situations they have learned about.
- Don't assume that you know more than your teen; it could be the other way around!

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

While it's always good news when an absence ends and the member returns home, some preparation is necessary to avoid misunderstandings, friction and other issues that may arise. The return is often the main challenge for families experiencing their first absence.

Many things have undoubtedly changed over the past few months (and that's perfectly normal!). The parent experiencing the absence has often adapted rules, routines and permissions in order to manage their energy and maintain adequate psychological health. There are also the changes in your home. You may have changed things to be more to your taste: furniture may have been moved, walls may have changed colour, you may have even bought new appliances.

If the returning member is not aware of all these changes, they may feel unsettled and no longer recognize their landmarks, which may create tension and delay family adjustments.

Preparing the return

Your teen may react to the return in a number of ways, depending on how the absence unfolded, their role during the absence, and all the factors listed at the beginning of this guide. Here, once again, it's best to let your teen go at their own pace in reconnecting with their parent. There are a few things you can do to help prepare your teen for the return of your military member:

- Invite your teen to have a discussion with the military parent about the changes since they left (directly or in the form of a letter, cartoon, drawing, email, etc.).
- Consider your teen's perspective in relation to the reintegration. What tasks could we give to the returning parent, how could we help them to easily reintegrate? What activity would your teen like to do with them

when they return, etc.

- Involve your teen in the preparations for the return (e.g., decorating the house for the reception, choosing the menu, asking for ideas on how to welcome the military member, etc.).
- Encourage your teen to identify their feelings concerning the return.
- Did your teen have any privileges during the absence that they will lose once the absent parent returns? It is important to be prepared for this eventuality. If you felt that these privileges had benefits, it's important to discuss them with your partner before they return so that the rules are consistent.
- Explain to your teen what a return is like and what to expect:
 - › Their parent is likely to be exhausted (jet lag, long hours of flying and waiting, the fast pace of the mission, the adrenaline rush, etc.).
 - › The member will have to adapt, since home and the mission are two completely different worlds and they will feel some effects (e.g., they may not be used to the sounds of your home anymore, or the slower pace of life, they might involuntarily speak in the form of orders, they might need some time alone, etc.).
 - › Many people will want to see the member, and the member will want to see the people they've missed.
 - › It is normal for the member to break certain habits without meaning to; encourage your teen to talk about it calmly and constructively.
 - › Does your teen have questions about the mission (you may even have some yourself)? This is normal. However, be prepared to get some unsettling answers, especially if the mission was more risky.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH MISSIONS

While most of the missions that have taken place in recent years are not considered high-risk per se, the military world does have to deal with this particular reality. Unlike young children, your teen is well aware of the risks associated with the military parent's job. There is no need to address them with metaphors, stories, etc. Instead, tell them the truth and emphasize that members are trained and equipped to deal with these situations.

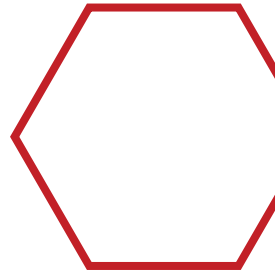
It is important not to trivialize any apprehensions your teen may have about this and to answer all of their questions, even if they ask them several times. If they seem anxious, don't hesitate to ask them more questions: What worries them the most? Do they think about it often? Do they have physical discomforts related to stress, such as insomnia or loss of appetite? Don't

hesitate to consult if you notice that the level of stress is interfering with your teen's functioning or seems to be disproportionate to the actual risk of the mission. If they refuse to talk to you, at least they will know that you are available when needed.

Bereavement

It is important not to wait until such an eventuality occurs to discuss death with your teen. The more open the family environment is to any type of discussions, the more comfortable your teen will be talking about any concerns.

There are services available for mourning a parent. In the event of a critical incident, don't hesitate to seek help; do so as soon as possible so that you and your child are supported early.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Valcartier Military Family Resource Centre
418 844-6060
absencemutation@crfmv.com

Family Information Line 1 800 866-4546

Member Assistance Program 1 800 268-7708
forces.gc.ca/assistance

Ligne parents 1 800 361-5085
(Parents help line – French) 1 888 603-9100
ligneparents.com

Entraide-Parents 418 684-0050
(Parents help line – French) entraideparents.com

Deuil jeunesse 418 624-3666
(Youth mourning – French) deuil-jeunesse.com



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