

Working Away From Home



Supporting families during COVID-19

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Getting Ready

While many things may feel out of your control, identify ways that you can prepare, practically and emotionally.

Discuss and agree how much contact with home you wish to have and what form this will take.

Make sure the 'at home' adult has contact details and access to any practical things they may need.

Allow children to ask hard questions and address these honestly. Reassure children that this situation will pass and that you will be coming home.

Try to avoid overburdening children with your own fears and worries.

Exchange 'comfort items' (eg a toy, photo or book) and allow children to help you to pack if they wish.

Spend time with each child individually. Avoid telling children to 'look after mum/dad' while you are away. Keep goodbyes short.





While you are apart

It may be hard to think about your loved ones and how they are doing.

It is normal for a person's focus to switch to their 'work team' in these situations. It doesn't mean they have stopped caring.

Make consistent efforts to keep in touch. If the agreed plan doesn't work, discuss and revise.

Online communication can be difficult because it is hard to read the emotional temperature and there is a risk of misunderstanding. If you can, give each other the benefit of the doubt. Any issues or disagreements you may be having are unlikely to be resolved at long distance and in such challenging circumstances. You may choose to 'park' some things for a later date.

AT HOME

Be prepared for some difficult feelings and challenging behaviour in the early days after a parent has left. Reassure children that although things are hard now, they won't always be.

Let feelings in. Have a cry. Sadness doesn't last forever. It will come and it will go.

If you are worrying about worst possible outcomes, try to also think equally about what the best possible outcomes might be. Come into the present – you are okay right now. You might consider trying a Mindfulness programme like [Headspace](#) or one of the activities [here](#).

Try to remain consistent with your normal rules around behaviour as this helps children to feel secure. Pick your battles wisely.

Focus on the things you can control. Try to let go of the rest.

Develop a routine and try to stick to it – getting-up time, mealtimes, a few planned activities, free play, bedtime. Use the weekends for less structured time – try to build in some rituals that make it feel more like a weekend. With older children and teens, explain how having a routine will help you all to get through this time. Plan together if they are willing.



While you are apart

AT HOME

Give children opportunities to exercise control when you can eg: choice of activities, encouragement to try a new skill, delegation of appropriate jobs and responsibilities. Help them to make lists, plans or to record their achievements.

Limit access to news and social media. This can be challenging with teens. Help by modelling healthy behaviours and discussion.

Look after yourself. It is okay for you to take a 'time out'. If you can take a moment to yourself, make sure everyone is safe and explain what you are doing and why ("I am feeling frustrated with this situation/cross/anxious and I am going to sit quietly and take some deep breaths/have a bath/read my book for a bit.")

Eat as well as you can. Meals help to break up the monotony of being stuck indoors and provide an opportunity for social contact.

If you have the space, try to make it possible for each person to have somewhere they can retreat to for some time alone when they need it.

Physical activity can help both adults and children to feel less stressed.

Use **play** to allow children to express their feelings.

Get help with coping with a crying baby [here](#).

Find (easy) ways to keep a record of what is happening at home. Video diaries, journals, keeping a box of items/pictures/projects to show the 'deployed' parent when they call. These can all help to keep an emotional connection by providing props to share experiences at a later date and bring you back together.

Young children who feel anxious may find a worry box helpful. You can find instructions [here](#) and other ideas to help with anxiety [here](#).

Start a family **jar of joy**—when you notice something that makes you feel good or grateful, write it on a slip of paper and place it in the jar. Read together later. This activity is particularly useful for sharing with the parent who is away.





Coming Back Together As A Family

Homecomings are often eagerly anticipated. Try to avoid a big build-up if possible.

Ask whether your child wants to make a cake or a banner – it doesn't matter if they don't; just making the offer signals that another change is coming and helps them to prepare.

Once the initial happiness of being reunited subsides, it is normal for there to be some friction as everyone adjusts to life together. Everyone has changed a bit, freedoms and responsibilities have changed. It is very normal to have disagreements. These will subside in time as new routines and ways of being together become established.

Take cues from the carer who has been at home during the separation to begin with, and resist the urge to dive in with discipline until everyone feels reconnected.

Allow time for emotional reconnection to happen.



More information:

[Naval Families Federation Parental Absence Resource](#)
[HM Government Advice](#)



How To Make a Worry Box



Aim: to allow a child to take a break from worries and concerns

You will need: An empty box (a tissue box or similar is ideal) Materials for your child to decorate it Blank slips or card or paper that will fit through the slot on the box

What to do:

1. Ask the child to decorate the box if they wish to.
2. Help them to find a place to keep it. This needs to be somewhere where they do not look at it all the time, away from the child's bed/personal space. Storing worries away from the child symbolises being able to put worries down and have a rest from them.
3. Talk with the child about how everybody has worries, and this is normal. Sometimes we need to be able to put our worries away for a while so that we can do things we want to do.
4. Ask the child which worries they would like to put away. Try to do this in a way that suggests that you will take them seriously and not dismiss fears as irrational. Here are some questions that may help. You can use these questions when you notice signs that your child is feeling anxious (from their behaviour, body language, or what they say):
 - a. What is it about...(the situation)...that is worrying you?
 - b. Why are you feeling worried?
 - c. What do you think is going to happen?

If they find it difficult to answer, you can guess aloud about what sort of things might be bothering them. It is unlikely that you will give a child additional worries by doing this.

Check that you have understood what they mean.

You don't have to say that a child's worries are right or wrong – it's better not to. You can say that it is completely understandable for a child to be worried when they are having frightening thoughts about something.

5. Write each worry on a separate slip of card or paper.
6. As the child puts each worry in the box, focus together on talking about some reasons why they do not need to hold on to the worry. If, for example, they are worried about a worst case scenario outcome to a problem, talk about what the best outcome might be. Try to encourage a balanced perspective without being dismissive of the child's fears.
7. Once the worries are in the box, the child might like to tape it shut or tie it with a ribbon.
8. Then put the box away in the place you agreed with the child. If the child is worrying about something which is an adult concern, the box can be given to their parent/carer to show that the adult will carry this responsibility for them, and they can let go of it.
9. Explain to the child that they can go and get on with the next activity and leave their worries behind for now.

Another approach is to put worrisome thoughts on hold by writing them down and popping them in the box. Then schedule some time (say, 15 minutes) each day to go over the child's worries together, listening and providing reassurance. It is best to avoid scheduling this time before bed.

How To Make And Use A Jar of Joy

Also known as a gratitude jar, this is easy to make and use.

Why?

It can help you to notice things that make you feel encouraged, hopeful and confident.

It creates a useful prop to help talk about good things that have happened, or that you are grateful for.

You or your children can use it as a reminder for when your deployed family member phones or video-calls.

You could keep it to remember how you and your family got through a difficult time.

You can dip into it when you are having a tough day and remind yourself that sadness doesn't last forever, that good things are still there.

You will need:

- A large jar, or you can use whatever you like – a special container, a box, whatever you prefer
- Materials to decorate if wished
- Blank slips or card or paper that can be written/drawn on and placed in the jar
- Pen/pencil/drawing materials



What to do:

Decorate your jar (if wished) and put it somewhere where it is visible for everyone in the house, along with the slips of paper and writing/drawing materials.

When you think of something that makes you feel happy, or that you are thankful for, write it down, and place the paper in the jar. You can include anything at all – these can be big or very small things. Younger children can draw their ideas.

You can dip into the jar any time you feel low. Or you could have a special time each day/week when you look at all the pieces of paper, maybe with family and friends over video-chat, or perhaps with your deployed person.

Useful Links

Useful links:

NHS Every Mind Matters

Childline

The Mix

YoungMinds

Further reading:

The Huge Bag of Worries

What's Worrying You?

What to do when you worry too much

The Silent Guides

My Hidden Chimp

For more information and advice

Visit our website www.nff.org.uk

Email us contactus@nff.org.uk

Call us on **023 9265 4374**

