

**WASHINGTON (AFPN) -- Consistency is key for children as their military parents deploy, a university psychologist said.**

Dr. Frederic Medway, psychology professor at the University of South Carolina, has been publishing research on family separation issues since 1987. He said his work has shown that while children of different ages have different needs, if parents offer as consistent an environment as possible, their kids tend to fare better.

"Set the tone early," Dr. Medway said. "Try not to make many big changes while the deployment happens."

That's easier to do with young children, he said. Parents have a lot more control when their children have not yet started school, and they should use that time to foster an environment of safety and stability because other challenges abound. Common childhood fears of things like animals and thunder often get compounded when children are thinking about a parent in a hostile zone, and explaining away those fears is tricky.

"Younger children won't understand abstract concepts such as time," he said. Checking off dates on a calendar or explaining, 'Mommy comes home in a year,' may not make much sense to them, so keeping big changes to a minimum helps them feel better.

With school-age kids, the situation becomes more complex, Dr. Medway said. They have more going on in their lives at school and with friends. Offering a consistent environment can be difficult for the parent at home, especially if the parent is working as well as raising the child.

As children reach adolescent age, parents must be especially sensitive to what they are going through.

"I think the teen years are especially tough because teens are notorious at not talking to their parents about things," Dr. Medway said. "I think this is a population that we as mental health people really need to watch out for."

Dr. Medway said young teens also have access to information and an ability to grasp it that younger children do not.

"Often they are worried, watching TV, CNN, hearing rumors," he said.

Another defining problem for adolescents is a wish to be the same as everyone else. Financial issues, lack of access to a car, clothes not jazzy enough and other problems become an excuse to lash out, he said.

"I think, unfortunately, a lot of these children look for something to attribute that to, and in some cases they will get angry with the stay-at-home parent because the other parent is overseas and their family isn't like everybody else," he said.

For these reasons and others, setting the tone early in terms of communication is critical to creating consistency for children once they go to school, Dr. Medway said.

"You've really got to start working on that open communication at age 4, ... because by the time your child hits 12 they may naturally shut down a little bit. If you don't have good communication in the beginning, it's certainly going to be difficult by the time they're in that 12-to-14 range," he said.

Families who have a parent deployed certainly see long-lasting effects due to separation and sacrifice, Dr. Medway said. These are lifelong consequences that will change the course of where that family is going, but not always for the worse. He mentioned that military kids often learn to be more independent and outgoing than their peers, for example.

Dr. Medway also said that each phase of deployment poses different challenges, and families who educate themselves tend to do better.

"I think it's so important to be informed, and that really means go to all the briefings that your unit has," he said. "Everything sort of starts there."

He also suggests getting supports in place long before separation starts, which means talking with friends, parents, grandparents and on-base family aids.

The months surrounding homecoming often offer the biggest challenges, Dr. Medway said. Part of that is due to high expectations.

"We expect that everything is going to be very well and very good, but soldiers change and families change, and oftentimes the very early period is a good period, but sometimes after 30 days or 60 days, there are some little bumps in the road," he said. "These bumps in the road are really a function of being apart from your loved one. They're not so much a function, necessarily, that your loved one was separated because of military service, because we see the same thing in long-term business travel, in missionary kinds of work, etcetera."

A combination of patience and consistency tends to help families most, he said. Research during the 1991 Persian Gulf War revealed that children's behavior often got worse during the reunion stage than it was during deployment.

"The child was responding to one parent who was consistent with himself," Dr. Medway said. "When you bring a second person back in, and their view of parenting may differ based upon the first person, that can throw the kids for a loop."

Another important aid in coping, one often left as a last resort, is the mental health service available in the community.

"Get to problems early," he said.

Teachers, school psychologists and school counselors are often great sources of help for kids, while military assistants, family doctors and chaplains can do a lot for parents.