



TRANSITIONS & TEENS: A GUIDE FOR MILITARY PARENTS

They say that “the only thing permanent in life is change,” and as the parent in a military family, you know that that’s true. Between moves and deployments, your family life is in constant transition. Unfortunately, studies show that adolescents who haven’t used drugs are more likely to start during times of transition in order to cope with stress. But don’t worry – while change is a part of the military life, risky behavior, like using drugs and alcohol, doesn’t have to be. This kit has everything you need to know to help keep your child healthy during transition periods.



RECOGNIZE TRANSITIONS

Major events like deployments, changing schools and injury/illness in the family are clearly stressors for kids and parents alike. But even life events that are natural and expected – starting puberty, moving up a grade – may also feel like a big deal to your tween or teen. By knowing what transitions usually affect military kids the most and why, it will be easier for you to recognize the situations in which your child might need more support.

THE TRANSITION:

Your family has just relocated to a different town.

WHY IT’S TOUGH:

Military kids move more often than other kids and may be used to starting over, but don’t take for granted that your child will adjust easily to a new routine. Being the new kid in school is hard! Your teen is probably worried about meeting new people and making friends in this unfamiliar environment. Plus, kids often target a group or clique that they want to become friendly with – but they either feel unwelcome or don’t know how to fit in.

THE TRANSITION:

Your child has just moved from grade school to middle school or from middle school to high school.

WHY IT’S TOUGH:

Your child has just gone from being a big fish in a little pond to a little fish in a big pond. “Cool” older kids can be intimidating and may even purposely try to make younger students feel unwelcome (elevator pass, anyone?). Freshmen boys tend to have a particularly hard time with this transition because the girls in their grade want to date juniors and seniors – and they ignore all the boys their own age.

THE TRANSITION:

Your child is going through puberty.

WHY IT'S TOUGH:

Puberty is natural, but it sure doesn't feel that way to a kid going through it. Your child is experiencing some major physical and hormonal changes, and she's probably uncomfortable with or embarrassed by her body. Also, even though puberty is normal, almost all kids feel at some point that they're abnormal – and they're too afraid to ask whether something's actually wrong.

THE TRANSITION:

Your tween or teen had a boyfriend or girlfriend at school – but not anymore.

WHY IT'S TOUGH:

You may have shrugged it off as puppy love, but in adolescence, having a significant other is everything. Middle schoolers and high schoolers judge themselves by how others view them, so when a relationship ends, it feels like the ultimate rejection. And if your family has just moved and your child is trying to keep up a "long-distance relationship," there may be a lot of added stress in your teen's life. Kids in this situation are often torn between making friends in their new environment and being constantly available to their significant other by phone and Internet chat.

THE TRANSITION:

You or your spouse deploy.

WHY IT'S TOUGH:

Your teen has to adjust to living with only one parent, which usually means taking on much more responsibility – helping out with younger siblings, doing extra chores and supporting the parent at home. It's also hard for kids to concentrate in school when they're missing or worried about Mom or Dad, and this can lead to poor grades and instances of acting out or talking back.

THE TRANSITION:

You or your spouse return from duty injured, ill or distracted.

WHY IT'S TOUGH:

Just like their injured parent, kids are forced to adapt to a whole new routine – helping Mom get around the house, finding new ways to play sports with Dad. The new and unexpected responsibility can be scary and overwhelming. And when a parent has an invisible wound – such as PTSD or a Traumatic Brain Injury – instead of a visible wound, kids might not understand the issue. Teens tend to blame themselves when their parents seem angry or sad, even if it has nothing to do with them.



Top 5 Reasons Teens Use Drugs During Transitions

To combat loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression

To mentally "check out" of family issues or school trouble

To ease discomfort in an unfamiliar situation

To look cool or change their image/reputation

To fit in with a desired group of friends



HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can't control the changes that impact your teen, but you can pay attention to his feelings, concerns and needs. Staying involved in your child's life during tough transitions is the single most important thing you can do to help keep him from experimenting with drugs and alcohol. In fact, only 18% of teens whose parents are significantly involved in their life transitions resort to high-risk activities, such as unsafe sex and drug use.



But sometimes, it's easy to get lost in your own transition—especially if your spouse is deployed and you're running the household—or to be turned off by your teen's negative mood. Here's a checklist to keep in mind the next time your child experiences a dramatic change.



CHECKLIST

___ **Am I encouraging open dialogue?** If your teen believes she can't tell you how she's really feeling, she'll be more likely to turn elsewhere for comfort and relief. Military children – especially teens – often keep feelings of nervousness and sadness to themselves for fear of upsetting their at-home parent. Constantly emphasize to your teen that even during deployment, she can always talk to you (or another caring adult) about anything – without judgment.

___ **Am I setting aside one-on-one bonding time?** If your whole family is going through a stressful transition, such as a move or deployment, your teen may feel neglected. Show your kid you love him by taking him shopping, bowling or out for ice cream – without any siblings tagging along. This special attention will remind him that you're still interested in what's going on in his life. It will also remind him that despite your preoccupation at the moment, you are going to pick up on problems or changes in his behavior.

___ **Am I monitoring and communicating more?** * Asking nit-picky questions may annoy your teen, but it can also keep her safe! If you get an unexpected or nonsensical response, it can immediately alert you that something is off. You have every right to ask your child which friends she's hanging out with, what they're planning on doing, and where they're staying – and you have the right to check her story or call her cell phone halfway through the night.

___ **Am I discussing the dangers of drugs and alcohol?** Even if they've heard it a million times before, it never hurts to talk to teens about the consequences of drinking and drug use. Try prompting your teen to talk to you honestly about his experience with different substances by asking, "So, have you heard about any kids at your school smoking pot?" or "What's your opinion on teens trying prescription pills?"

**If your monitoring leads you to observe some disturbing behavior or changes in your child (weight loss/gain, loss of appetite, strange sleeping patterns), you may want to enlist a physician's help.*



TALKING POINT: WHEN PARENTS COME HOME “DIFFERENT”

When parents are stressed, their kids are stressed – and according to a recent Partnership study, stress is the number one reason teens try drugs. So if you or your spouse has recently come home from deployment injured, anxious or emotionally distant, try saying one of the following to your teen:

“ I know it’s frustrating that Mom isn’t as funny or talkative as she used to be. Unfortunately, sometimes, when people are deployed, they come back with emotional pain instead of physical pain. But I promise you, you’ve done nothing wrong, and Mom still loves you very much, even when she seems upset. ”

“ It must be really confusing to feel like you miss someone who’s actually physically here. But it’s normal for you to miss the person Dad was before he left home. I miss that person, too. It’s okay for us to talk about this, and it’s okay for you to ask for help dealing if you ever need it. ”