Changing Roles and the Deployment Cycle

By Jennifer Barter with Judith A. Myers-Walls

There are many important tasks that need to be completed in families. Each family plays a role as part of the team and completes certain tasks. Those tasks change during the process of deployment. The first step to a smooth transition through the deployment process is managing those changes. And the first step in managing the changes is examining your family’s roles.

Studies have found what roles are held by most families. They have found that there are certain things that all families need to do. The chart below shows some common roles that were listed in those studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread-Winning</td>
<td>Provides financial support to the family through earning an income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caregiving</td>
<td>Takes care of and nurtures children and other dependent family members, including bathing, feeding, putting to bed, helping with homework, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making &quot;Big&quot; Decisions</td>
<td>Makes major family decisions such as family moves, buying big-ticket items, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making &quot;Little&quot; Decisions</td>
<td>Makes smaller decisions such as grocery shopping, small purchases, family activities, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repairing and Maintaining</td>
<td>Takes initiative to fix things around the house or yard, mow the lawn, care for the car, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting with Kin</td>
<td>Keeps the family communicating, getting together, and close. Stays in touch with extended family and keeps up with important dates and events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Planning</td>
<td>Plans social events and keeps the family’s relationship with friends and the community going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
<td>Completes household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, ironing, and organizing.</td>
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*Adapted from Linda Haas (1980).*
Consider what roles you and other family members play in your family. Do you play more than one role? Do you share roles? Before family members can work on changing family roles, it helps to identify what roles each member plays. Consider the baseball team discussed earlier. If players do not understand their own and others’ positions, the team will not be successful.

- For a more complete discussion of family roles, go to Families First-Keys to Successful Family Functioning: Family Roles provided by Virginia Tech Extension

Considerations for Family Roles across the Deployment Cycle

Deployment is not just one thing. There are stages of the deployment process [link to the Deployment Cycle] that have been identified by some researchers. The experiences of service members and families may be different at each stage. Experiences also may be different for each family.

Each phase of deployment brings its own set of challenges regarding family roles. This section will help you prepare for changing family roles during each stage of deployment.

**The Deployment Cycle: An Overview**

Follow this link for an overview of a deployment cycle as presented by one source. It describes some common events of each phase of the deployment cycle and lists positives, challenges, and issues.

Think about the family roles listed above. Clearly, the service member cannot keep doing everything around the house when he or she is gone. There are several possible ways to handle the jobs that the service member usually does.

1. The spouse can do them.
2. The children can do them.
3. The family can pay someone else to do them.
4. Several people can do them together.
5. Maybe the service member can do some of them from a distance.
6. Maybe the jobs can wait, so no one will do them while the service member is gone.

Each role may be handled in a different way. Service members and family members should remember several things:

- No one can really take the service member’s place. But other people can help with doing some of the jobs that he or she did.
- No changes need to be permanent. Families can try different ways to organize tasks. If one arrangement doesn’t work, it can be changed. And families expect the service member to come home again at some point and take some of the tasks back.
• Family members might need to try some new roles. They probably will need help at first. They might need some new training or tools to take on those roles. If so, the service member might teach the family member how to complete the task before leaving. The service member could even create quick guides, lists, or flipbooks for each role. It is important to be patient when a family member tries something for the first time. And do not expect it to be perfect.

• When a new person does a new role, he or she will probably do things differently from other people. Maybe he or she will find a better way to do things. Be flexible and let family members be creative. It is not an insult to the service member if another family member does things differently.

• Family members always like to be appreciated. Make sure to thank them for trying new things. Encourage them when they learn new things. Offer to help if a family member is struggling with a new task.

• Every time someone joins the family or leaves the family, roles need to change. When the service member returns, things do not just go back the way they were before. Roles need to change again.

Pre-Deployment
  • This is a good time to think about how roles will change when the service member is absent. Families may feel out of control at this time. It is not possible to control everything, but families can make plans. The service member can provide instructions and training for some roles. Maybe he or she could make videos or recordings that children can use during deployment. Planning and preparation are important tasks during the pre-deployment phase. Families may want to make a pre-deployment checklist. This pre-deployment checklist is provided by the Marine Corps.

Deployment
  • Some researchers note the importance of the service member staying connected during deployment. Some service members have continued to help with some family roles while they are deployed. Those families have had an easier time readjusting after deployment. What technology, equipment, or resources could help to make that possible? One caution, however: be aware that the service member will have other responsibilities while he or she is gone and will have limited abilities to help with family roles.

Post-Deployment:
  • The post-deployment phase requires major changes in family roles again. It is important to understand that due to changes in all family members, roles cannot return to what they were before deployment. Children have grown; family members have learned new skills. The service member has experienced new things, too. It is important to make changes slowly and gradually. Families need to create a “new normal.”
The following activities will help families to deal with family roles before, during, and after deployment.

**Pre-Deployment Activity**  This activity looks at the roles your family plays. You can do this on your own, or you can ask other family members to do it with you. Follow the instructions on the activity sheet. (Note that this activity is designed to be completed before deployment, but it would be possible to complete it during deployment as well.) After you finish the activity, keep your forms. You will use these materials again after deployment.

**Post-Deployment Activity**  [link to post-deployment roles activity] This activity guides you through the process of re-assigning roles after the service member returns from deployment. Again, it is good to include all family members.

**Additional Resources**

- For more information: [A quick review of fulfilling roles when a family member is absent provided by Ohio State University](#).

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An educational piece created by Jennifer Barter, graduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi, and Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., Certified Family Life Educator and Professor Emerita, Purdue University. Posted on Purple Wagon, a web site hosted by Purdue University Extension.