



Moving with Children

The average military family moves at least twice as often as the average American family. Military parents cannot help but wonder what effects the frequent moves will have on their children. The active duty parent may feel guilty for uprooting the family for a new assignment. Parents take heart! Studies of military children have shown that because of the varied environments and situations in which they are placed, they learn to be adaptable and flexible. They learn skills to cope and develop self-confidence and strong identity. So parents, your children will be gaining a lot from being part of a military family that is on the move.

Helping your children through the PCS process is a matter of making the move happen rather than letting it happen. Your attitude and level of involvement with the children before, during and after the move will largely determine their reactions to the uprooting that a move requires.

Your peace of mind will be assisted considerably by your children if they are not reacting violently against the move. After all, you do need some peace during this time of disruption.

The age of your children can make a big difference in the way they respond to a move. We will address this issue by grouping children in the following categories: infants, toddlers, pre-schoolers, elementary school ages, and teens.

Infants - Preschool

Infants have few concerns outside their immediate environment. A baby is just as happy in Korea or Turkey or Texas. The very young do, however, take many of their “cues” from the adults who care for them. When parents are angry, frustrated or otherwise miserable, infants often mirror this mood in their own behavior. They also reflect their parents love and contentment.

Generally, very young children will do better during and after the PCS move if they are kept on the same familiar routine and introduced to new sights, sounds and smells with some care and patience. It is more likely that they will reflect your feelings about moving to a new home than it is that they will react directly to a new town or home.

Toddlers have some difficulty with time and space and probably won't comprehend “we will move to Australia in five months”. Toddlers will do better with “we're going to get to move to a new and exciting place soon”.

Toddlers express confusion and fear if they believe things will be radically different within the family or if they believe much of their familiar world will be lost. They need reassurance that, “we will all be together” or that “we will have your toys and things with us there, too”.

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Encouraging your toddlers to say how they feel and telling them those feelings are OK is a good technique. They'll swamp you with questions that might cause you some additional stress because of your uncertainty about the move. Handle the barrage of questions as you would any other barrage by the same child. The important thing with this age group is reassurance, patience and time. If you make a concentrated effort to be positive about the move with the children and your spouse, the whole process will be smoother.

At moving time, allowing toddlers to bring along one or two favorite things to hand carry will give some physical reassurance to them, but your reactions to the move are still the key guides to how they will react to changes and uncertainty. Your toddlers do not care about the new town or even much about the new neighborhood or house. They are concerned about the people and things within arm's reach. They will gauge your reactions to the move and the new place by watching you and other older household members.



Unmistakably, your little toddlers have begun to develop their own personalities and will develop some feelings about this rather major family change by themselves. The child who remembers an airplane trip you took to a funeral where everyone looked sad and cried may well decide that airplane trips mean death and be perfectly terrified of the idea of moving only because flying to the new home is mentioned.

The fear may come from what seems like outer space but reduction of that fear is achieved in the same way as with most other childhood fantasies. The parent reassures the child using a calm, steady presentation of the facts. Laughing at the child or dismissing the fear as silly, stupid or weird isn't nearly as effective as simply unraveling the web of fear and letting the child see that planes and death aren't logically and inevitably connected.

Pre-schoolers often act as if they understand more than they really do. It helps to remember that children use the logic of children. That's the logic that says the Easter Bunny and Dora the Explorer are as real as Santa.

You might ask this age child to help decide on a placement for the beloved pet that cannot move with the family. You might also enlist the child's help in sorting out things that won't be moved. You might even get a small suitcase or box and allow your pre-schooler to practice packing some things.

By all means, let pre-schoolers keep a favorite item or toy during the move so that the new and unfamiliar is made less frightening by the physical presence of a friendly bear, doll or pet to which they seem particularly attached.

This age child can be told honestly that the family is moving. They need time to deal with feelings of loss or confusion about the move. The truth is the best tonic a parent can administer here. Parents are still the best support a child has at a time of confusion or concern. Your positive attitude is the best model for your children's attitudes.

School-age

Elementary school-aged children may be losing their friends when they move. They may have just begun to take part in school activities, sports or scouting. They will feel these losses. They may express what seems irrational fear of losing their lifestyle just as it's beginning. They may also be reacting to some teasing from friends and classmates due to jealousy. Grade school children may even express a fear of getting lost in a new town or neighborhood. Reassure them that you will explore with them or take them with you when you go house hunting. The maturity level of the child and your amount of patience will determine the advisability of this last suggestion. Children are much more likely to be satisfied with a new home if they have had some part of the decision to live there. Even when children have reservations about the new home, the mere fact they were included in the decision often reduces or eliminates fears and makes the entire family move much easier. Even

if the entire family can't go house hunting, consider providing pictures to the children giving them the chance to visualize their new home more realistically.

Children in the elementary years need to belong. They need to exercise their skills at socializing and, even though they are extremely flexible, they are not infinitely adaptable any more than you are. They need some assurances about life out there in that strange new world. They will be concerned about the customs and activities there, the more you can inform them, the less disruptive, and stressful things will be for the children and for you.

If you visit without them, look for their favorite fast food, the style of clothes kids wear in town, the number of kids in the neighborhood who appear to be the same age as yours. Visit the school they will be attending and get them some printed information. Help them make new friends by meeting some parents before you move.

Kids who are under 12 have been surveyed and responded that they felt much more comfortable about moving to new towns, and even countries, when their parents listened to their concerns about the move. They don't seem to need to make the decisions themselves but they do seem to accept the move better when they're kept fully informed.



Teenagers' greatest concerns are leaving friends and starting over with new ones; being accepted in a new environment where things may be quite different. Research suggests that it may be more difficult for a female teenager to relocate than it is for a male teenager.

The disruption of a PCS move has the highest potential for damage among young teenagers; but be prepared to have your older teens try to convince you to leave them behind with friends' families – particularly if they are approaching their final year of high school. This is the age group where children make new discoveries. They seem like emotional schizophrenics – one day they are terribly mature and stable and the next day they are emotionally infantile or worse. They are experimenting with different roles and identities to discover which one “feels most comfortable”.

It is apparent that the once very dependent children are becoming less and less dependent and more and more able to make decisions on their own. That leads to parental realization that “if he/she is growing up, I must be growing older”. Aside from that shattering realization, there is the very real fear that since your teenagers are now old enough, the “evils” of drugs, alcohol and sex will enter their lives and yours. This combination of elements creates a disturbing picture for parents, but need not result in the parents or children becoming terribly stressed. The management of stress is, after all, the management of our reactions to the events of our lives. Some families seem to enjoy each move more than the last. Some parents react to their children's arrival at adolescence with relief since they feel freed from babysitting as their children become more independent.

The young teenager must go through the many phases of moving just as the adults in the family. During the “unplugging” phase of moving, the teenager may experience initial shock followed by anger, depression and even last minute panic. These reactions are to be expected and knowing this may help you weather this storm of emotions with less frustration and confusion. Often, knowing what to expect from your teenager is enough to prepare you for the emotional turmoil they experience when the family must relocate. 🌐

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