



Strong Families Strong Forces: Supporting Military Families through Military-Related Transitions and in the Aftermath of Trauma

Vanessa Jacoby, PhD, ABPP
Associate Professor
Strong Families Support
and Prevention Program Director

Samantha Marasa, PhD
Post Doctoral Fellow

University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio
STRONG STAR Research Consortium

Strong Families Team

- **Ellen Devoe, PhD, LICSW, PhD**
Principal Investigator and Developer
- **Michelle Acker PsyD** and **Ruth Paris, PhD**
Co-Developers
- **Adaptation and Development Team**
Vanessa Jacoby, PhD, ABPP
Katy Dondanville, PhD, ABPP
Abby Blankenship, PhD

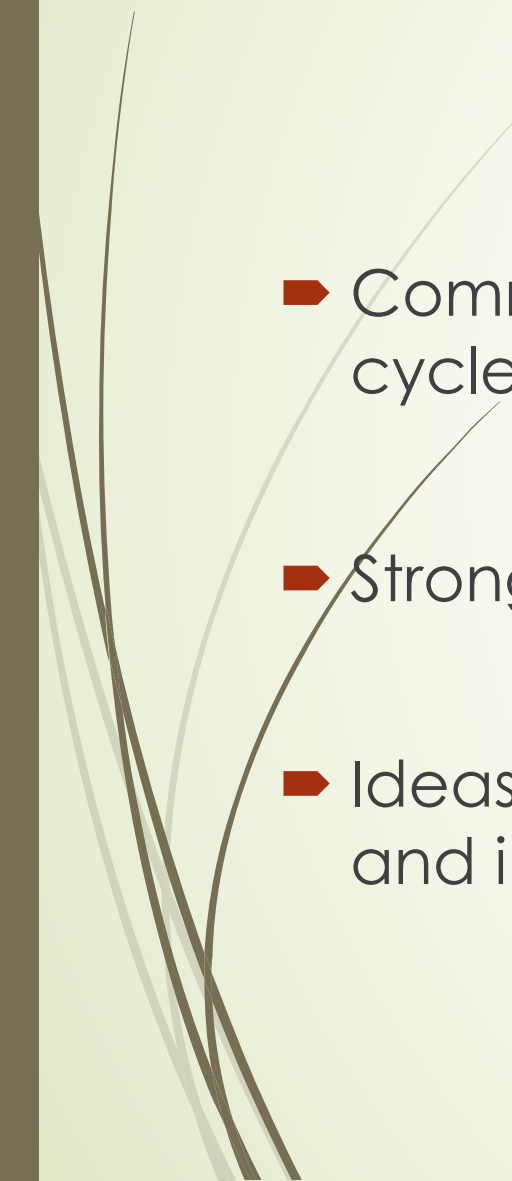
Implementation Team:

Olivia Hayes, LMSW
Samantha Marasa, PhD
Frankie Griffin, PhD
Venee Hummel, LCSW
Ellen Maynard, LICSW, MPH
Dave Prouty, MSW
Heidi Rathbun-McVeigh, LCSW,
Abby Ross, MSW, MPH, PhD
Christina Watts-Figueroa, LPC, LMFT

A special acknowledgment to all the families that have shared their stories and their lives with us.



Overview

- ▶ Common challenges for military families through the deployment cycle
 - ▶ Strong Families Strong Forces support program
 - ▶ Ideas for working with Military Families across the deployment cycle and integrating family support in PTSD treatment
- 

Military Families

>3 million Service Members have deployed

Representation of Parents

> 1/3 of total DOD force

Young children make up the largest group

37.2% under age 6

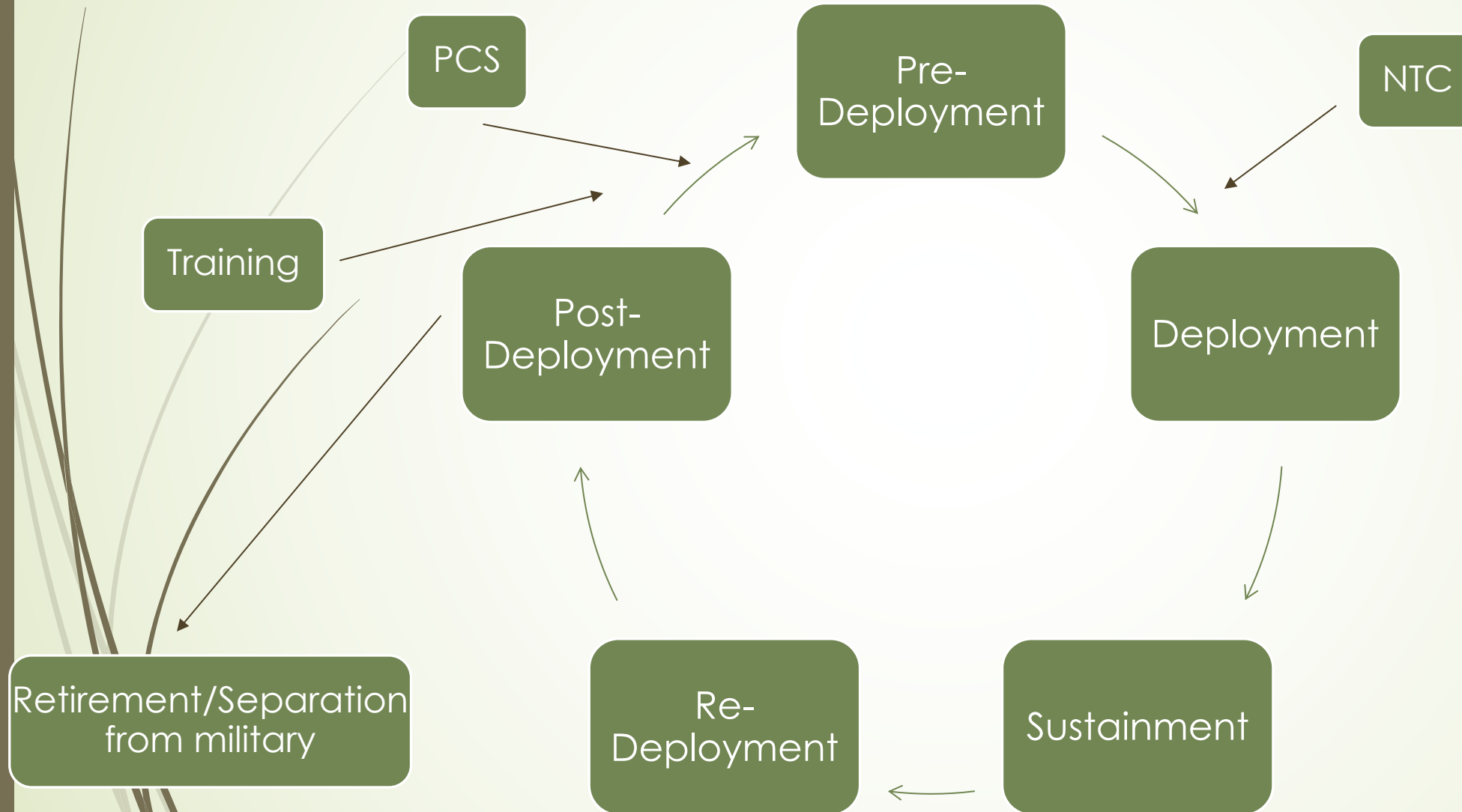
69.5% under age 12



The Deployment Cycle

And implications for military families

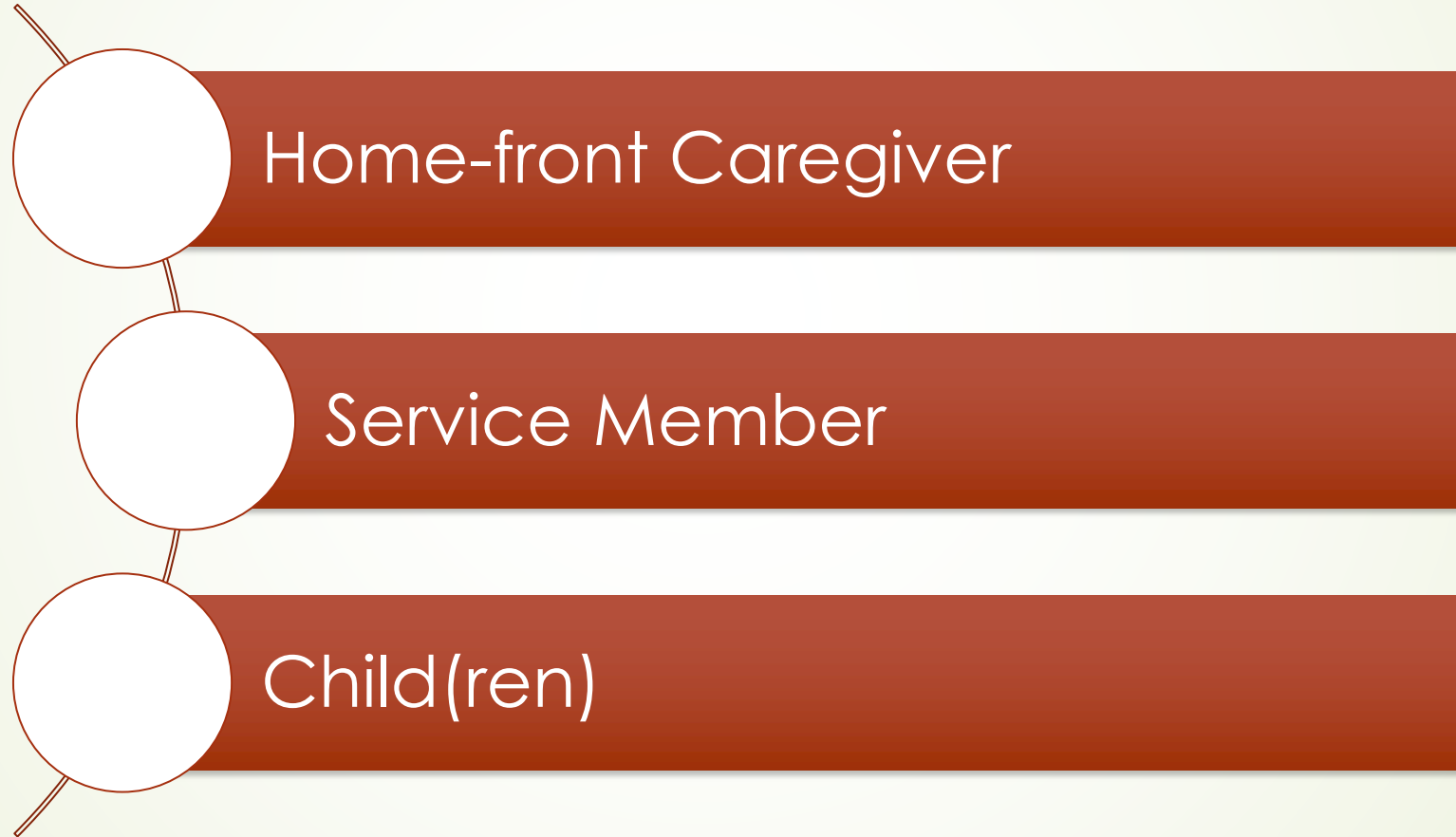
Military-Related Separations and Transitions



Common Challenges of the Deployment Cycle for Military Families



All Members of the Military Family are Affected



Challenges for Military Children

➤ Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties

- Externalizing behaviors
- Sleep difficulties
- Depression
- Anxiety

➤ Strained Parent-Child Relationships

Outcomes related to:

- Length of deployment
- Cumulative time away
- Parental health and psychosocial functioning during and after deployment

Home-Front Caregiver



Service Members

“At risk” Mental Health

Family Functioning

➤ Marital Satisfaction

- Dissatisfaction
- Divorce
- Intimate partner violence

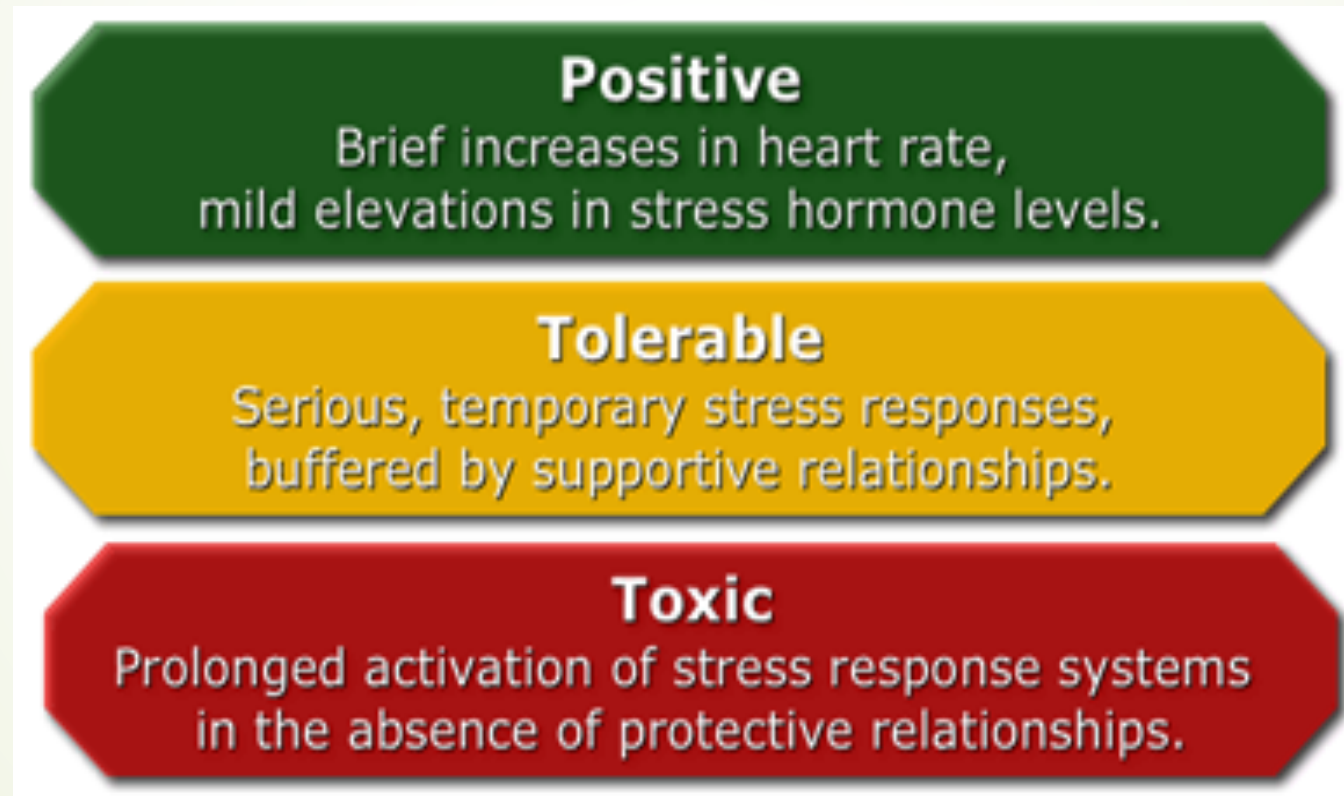
➤ Parental functioning

- Dissatisfaction
- Child maltreatment
 - Highest risk during transition
 - Increased risk: child has special needs + poorer parental health




Levels of Stress

Deployments in and of themselves to not traumatize children.





Resilience in Practice

- Finding purpose and meaning in the deployment experience
 - Make important and meaningful connections
 - Finding creative and memorable ways to stay connected
 - At home caregiver helps facilitate service member's connection to child(ren) through covert coparenting
 - Service Member helps at home parent from the combat zone
- 



When Stress is Compounded with Traumatic Stress

Implications for Military Families

Traumatic Stress from Different Perspectives

Service
Member

- Combat Exposure

Supporting military families through military-related transition and in the aftermath of trauma



Strong Families Strong Forces

Relationship-based coparenting prevention and support program

- Designed to prevent and reduce stress associated with military-related separation and transition
- Targets the whole family
 - parent-child
 - coparenting
 - partner/spousal
- Developed using a Community Based Participatory Research model
- Flexible – content, location, and point of entry





Targets of Intervention

➤ **Family Communication**

- Building a safe, shared language
- Military service, separation, and transition

➤ **Emotional Connection**

- Seeing through child's eyes makes space for emotional connection
- Activities designed to facilitate emotional connection

➤ **Effective Coparenting**

- Reflection of coparenting practices across military service
- Identifying core coparenting values
- Identifying most helpful coparenting strategies for current phase of service or life

Reflective Functioning

The ability to understand that one's own or another's behaviors are linked to internal feelings, wishes, thoughts, and desires.



Self Reflection

“What's happening for me?”



Couple Reflection

“What's happening for my partner?”



Parental Reflection

“What's happening for my child?”



Strong Families Across Separation and Transition

Introduction Modules:
You and Your Child(ren)
Becoming a Military or Veteran Family

Pre-Transition

Parenting and Coparenting
Communication & Connection

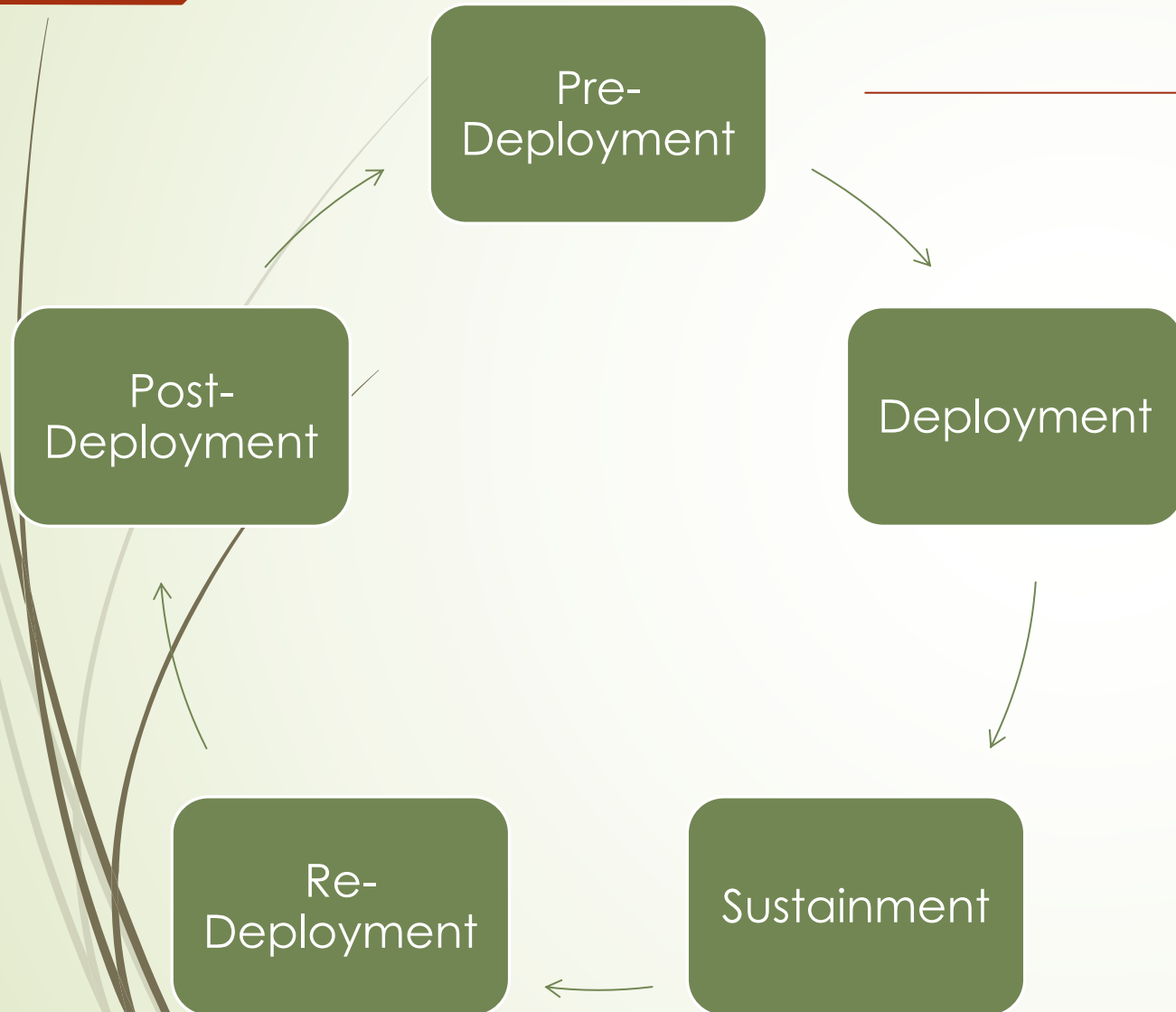
During Separation

Routines and Rituals
Keeping Yourself
Parenting and Coparenting
Communication
Play and Pleasure
Preparing for Homecoming

Reintegration

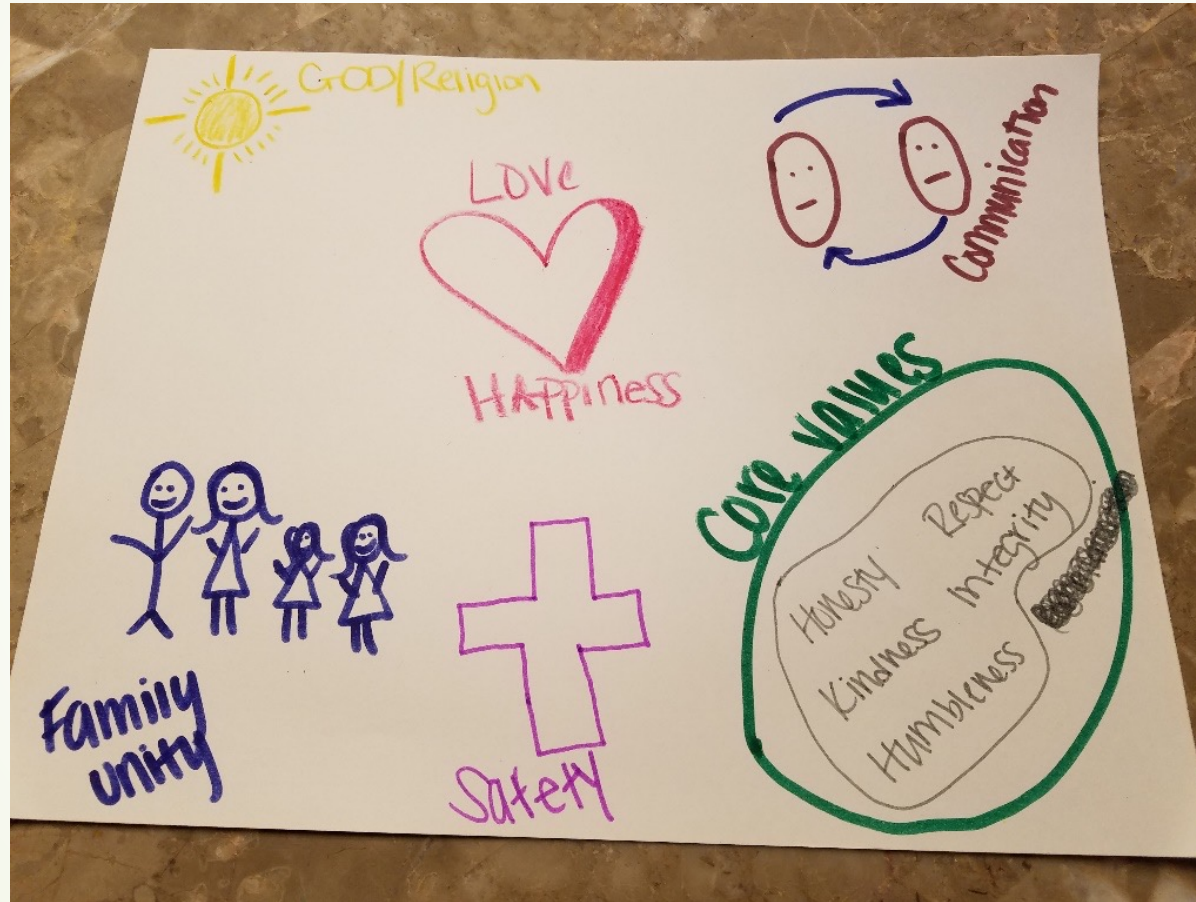
Your Partner's Deployment Experience
Your Child's Deployment Experiences
Catching up with your Child
Catching up with your Partner and Self
Parenting Coparenting
Goodbye

Helping Military Families through separations

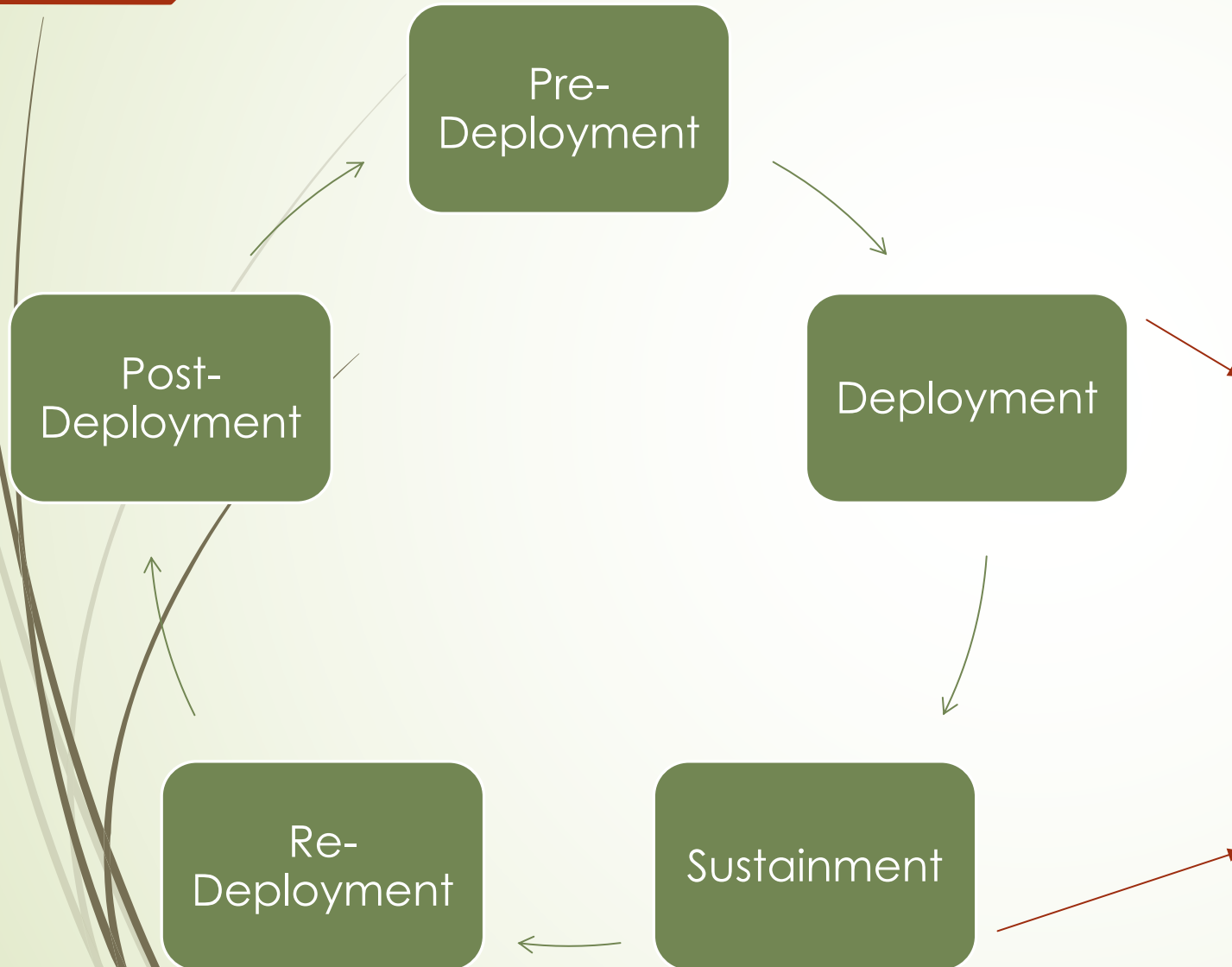


- Help families create Communication and Coparenting Plans to manage expectations
- Help families develop a shared language for how to talk to their children about
 - Meaning of being a military family
 - The upcoming deployment

Example Activity: Family Flag



Helping Military Families through separations



- Support the homefront parent in “Covert Coparenting”
- Support the facilitation of whole family emotional connection during the separation
- Help the homefront parent practice self-care and facilitate the use of community support

“Coparenting” is the shared activities and coordination between parent-figures as they work together to raise and support children. Positive, cooperative, and warm co-parenting is related to a child’s well-being.



“Overt” Coparenting happens when parents are together



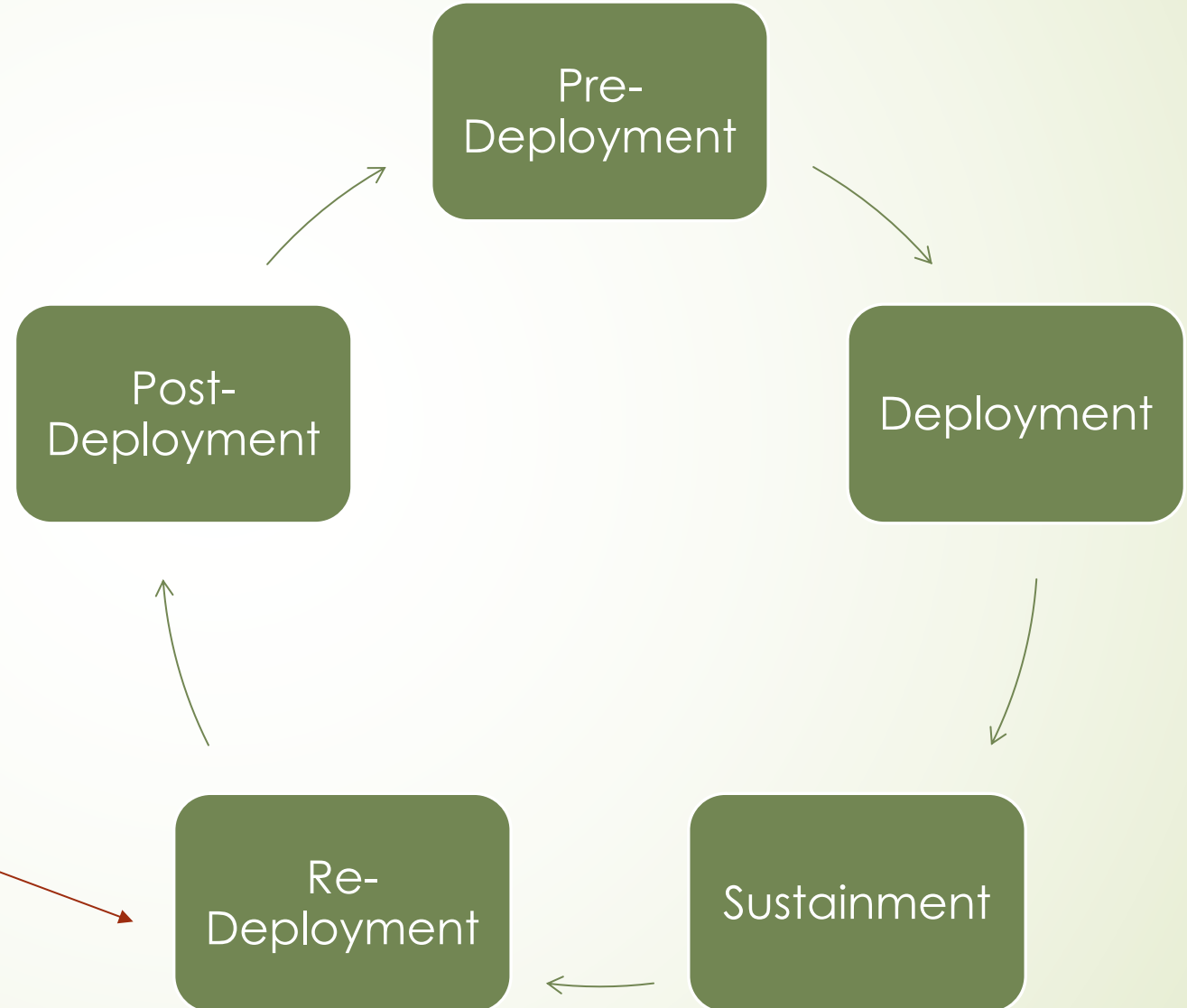
“Covert” Coparenting happens when parents are separated

Maintaining Connection Through Play

- Active duty soldier took blocks to Germany so that he and his 1 year old daughter could play blocks over video.
- NG/R homefront parent sent 3.5 year old son's identical toys in care packages so dad and son could play over video
- Two sons ages 4 and 6 gave dad a Spiderman and Batman pocket pets to keep dad safe. Dad made adventure videos with Spiderman and Batman and sent the videos to the boys.
- A mother and teenage daughter started a "book club" with just them. They read books and talked about them through text or video chat when they could.

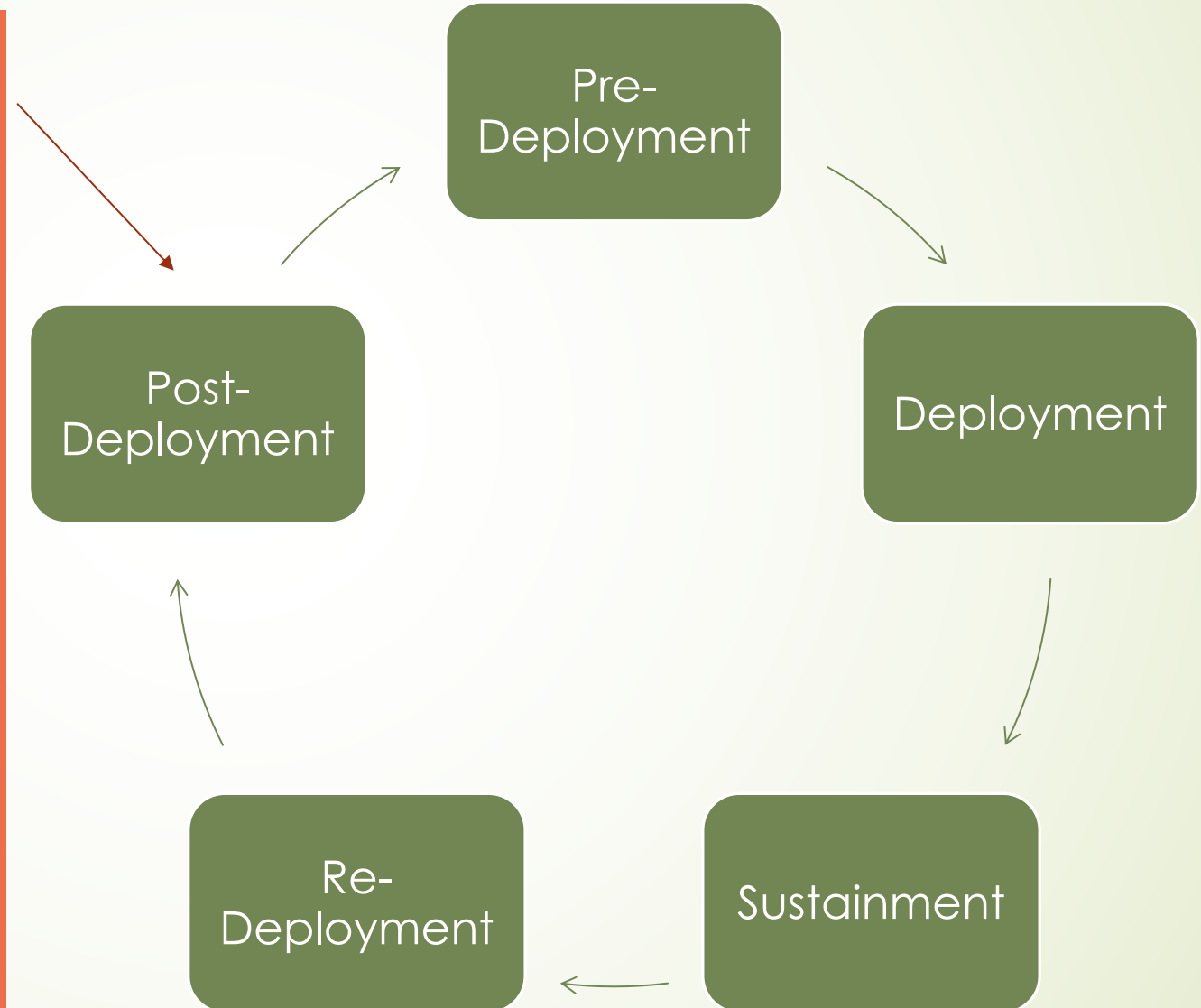
Helping Military Families through the Deployment Cycle

- Support the homefront caregiver in preparing for the service member's return.
- Help the homefront parent prepare her children for what to expect upon return.



Helping Military Families through the Deployment Cycle

- Support the family in communicating about their deployment-related experiences.
- Support the family in “catching up” with each other
 - Reestablishing couple intimacy
 - Reestablishing meaningful interactions with children
- Support the family in processing and negotiating any changes in family roles or routines
- Support the couple in reestablishing a united coparenting team

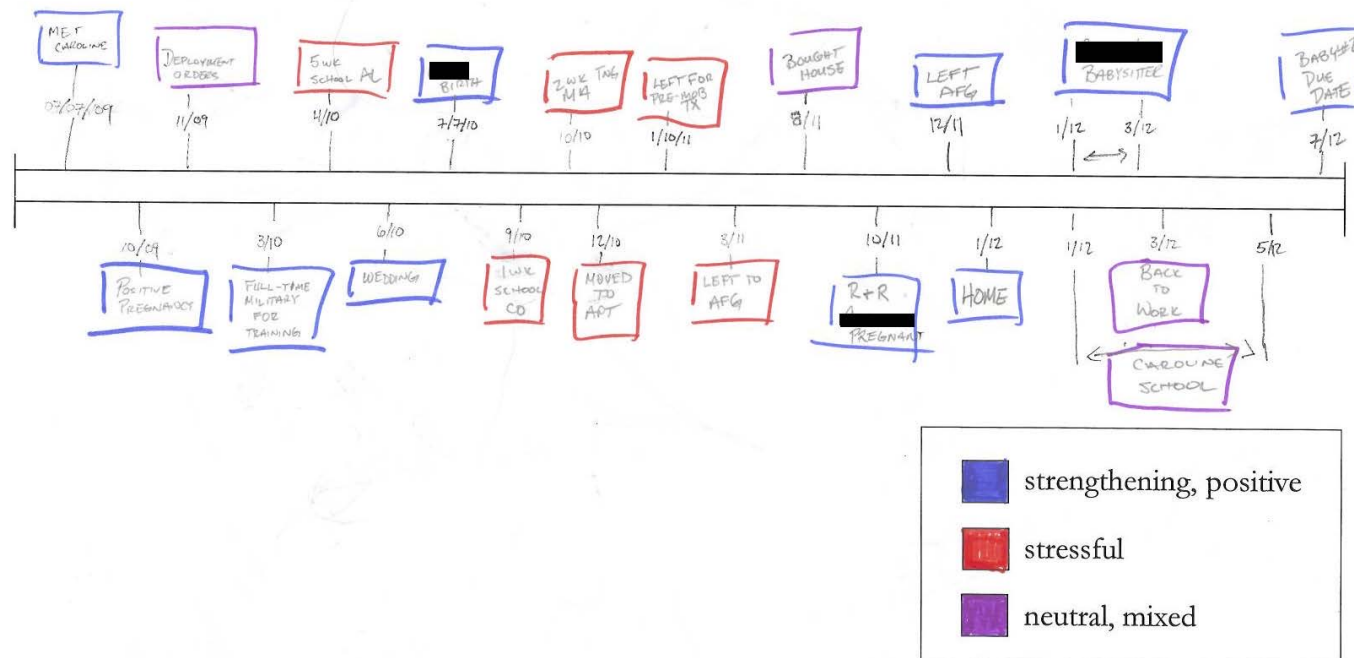


Example Activity: Deployment Timelines

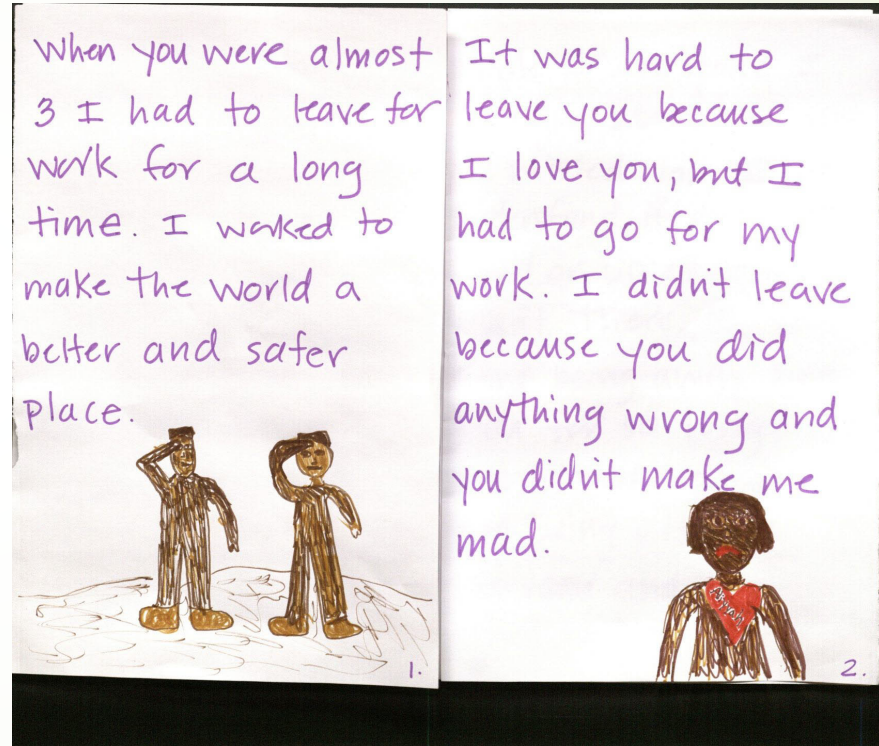
Strong Families Strong Forces

The [REDACTED] Family

Our Story of Deployment and Reintegration



Example Activity: Create a Storybook



Helping Military Families with PTSD

- Educate the family about PTSD and the impact on families
 - Externalize PTSD
- Educate the family on evidence-based treatments for PTSD
 - This is treatable
- Support the family in finding their available resources for treatment
- Help the family develop language for how to talk to each other and their children about parental PTSD

https://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/docs/Talking_with_Kids_about_PTSD.pdf

When a service member or veteran is experiencing significant posttraumatic stress that is impacting family functioning



Questions