



Families living separately

Defence Community Organisation

Members with dependents unaccompanied

Sometimes, when a military member is posted, families may choose to remain in their current location while the military member moves alone to their new posting. When families choose to live apart in this way, it is called “Member With Dependents Unaccompanied” and is often referred to by the military as “MWDU” or “MWD(U)”.

Families choose this option for a range of reasons that support family stability. For example, “going MWDU” allows partners to keep their current job, children to stay at their school, and family members to maintain consistent access to healthcare.

Choosing to go MWDU is an important family decision. Families should research the new posting location and discuss the implications of living apart and its possible affect on each family member before coming to a decision.

The policies governing MWDU and its accompanying entitlements are described in Chapter 8 of [Defence’s Pay and Conditions Manual](#). You should read this chapter thoroughly before choosing to go MWDU.

Some things to consider before deciding to go MWDU

The vital element to successfully living as a separated family is the quality of your relationship, and couples who interact more positively have stronger relationships.

Families thinking about MWDU should place a high priority on frequent, consistent and high quality communication, and it’s essential that the family develop a shared sense of purpose.

Some ideas you may wish to consider when discussing MWDU include:

- Get together with the whole family and discuss why you’re considering going

MWDU. Have a solid understanding of the reason and purpose for this choice.

- Together, research the new posting location and discuss the implications of living apart and its possible affect on each family member before coming to a decision.
- Discuss and plan how you want to communicate with each other while MWDU. Planning to share everyday details of life, the highlights, lowlights and the mundane, are important building blocks in maintaining family intimacy.
- Work to understand and respect each other’s perception of purpose—don’t assume you each view the separation in the same way.
- Be aware of not placing greater value on the member’s role at the cost of the ‘stay at home’ partner.
- Plan in case things go wrong. Openly discuss areas of potential difficulty and brainstorm ways of dealing with them.
- Work through the ‘talking points’ worksheet together as a family as you discuss MWDU as an option.

Sharing emotional issues

Sharing emotions serves an important function. When you share emotions, it makes them feel less intense. It helps you connect





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with others and can help you feel less isolated.

If you avoid talking about emotions and problems it will often make the feelings more intense and problems worse.

Here are some questions to keep in mind when you and your family are discussing MWDU:

- Why are we doing this?
- Who does it involve?
- When will we evaluate how we are doing?
- What if it does not work? What options do we have?
- When will it finish?
- What challenges do we foresee based on our personalities, temperaments, likes and dislikes?

Respect and understanding are essential—remember, each of you will perceive the situation quite differently.

Because people are relatively adaptable once they know what they're facing, it's important that you explore as many angles as possible, so that you can become familiar with and adapt to what may lie ahead.

Supporting children

Communicating truthfully and openly with your children about the reasons your military member may live apart from the rest of the family is important to help them understand and cope with a parent being away.

If possible, prepare your child for what is going to happen in advance, explaining clearly where, why and for how long their parent is going away. This helps dispel

uncertainties and fears, or any belief that the separation is their fault.

Encourage children to express their feelings, perhaps by sharing some of your own feelings and thoughts.

Older children can be involved in the planning, and may want to work through the discussion points with you. They can help figure out new roles and responsibilities during their military parent's absence.

Keep the usual rules, expectations and discipline in place in the parent's absence, but establish the new routines and responsibilities as soon as possible.

Encourage your children to keep a record of what's going on in their lives through art, photos, stories, scrapbooks or podcasts which they can share with their parent.

Remember, children are often unable to articulate their feelings and thoughts as adults do. If they are having trouble dealing with stress and changes during parent absence, it will often present in their behaviour or in health complaints.

Some notes on change and transition

Change is a process: relocating, moving house, acquiring a new boss, a promotion, losing a job, having a baby, losing a loved one. Change is generally tangible and observable, and you can usually identify the point in time when it occurred.

Transition is the process of letting go of the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they become.

This can be a period of confusion, yet it is a natural process of disorientation and reorientation marking the turning points in the path of growth. Perhaps it is an acceptance





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that you are in a process of transition and that it carries with it natural feelings of confusion and displacement.

It is important not to take the disorientation on as your identity, but rather as a phase in life on the path to accepting the change.

Realising that it is not necessarily the change itself that may be difficult, but rather the process of taking hold of and embracing the new. The paradox is that the very things we wish we could hold on to and keep the same, were originally produced by change.

Resources, further reading, and where to get help

The Australian Defence Force provides a support system for families who decide to go MWDU.

Chapter 8 of [Defence's pay and conditions manual](#) contains information on separation allowances and accommodation allowances as well.

[Defence Community Organisation's website](#) has a range of information, advice and resources for military families, particularly those experiencing deployment and family member absence.

There are resources for parents with tips and information about guiding children through parental absence, from very young children to teenagers.

These include the *Deployment Support Booklet*, and the *Don't Forget it's Bin Night* and *Going Solo* DVDs. The DVDs are a great resource to watch as a family, and can be a useful tool for starting a discussion about what parental absence will mean for you.

DCO has a range of children's books which are designed to help younger children

understand more about the military lifestyle and develop coping strategies for parental absence.

These free resources are available for order from the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

All-hours Defence Family Helpline

Defence families can contact the all hours Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608 at any time to discuss MWDU. The Helpline is staffed by qualified human services professionals, including social workers and psychologists, who can provide you with support, advice and information.

Professional support

If needed, DCO can supply short-term casework and counselling services from social workers to help you through any difficulties.

Emergency support

If an emergency or crisis occurs when an ADF member is away from home, the family may access practical assistance and emergency support. We also offer support in times of injury, illness or bereavement.

Stress management and building resilience

DCO runs a suite of local programs called FamilySMART, TeenSMART and KidSMART. The SMART sessions help you identify and build on your strengths, learn techniques to cope with the challenges of military life like deployment, and become more resilient, positive and self-reliant.

For any queries or to sign up for a SMART program, contact the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.





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In addition to the Defence Community Organisation, there are a number of agencies supporting Defence families.

Defence Families Australia

Defence Families of Australia is a group formed to represent the views of Defence families. Its aim is to improve the quality of life for Defence families by providing a recognised forum for their views and by reporting, making recommendations and influencing policy that directly affects families.

www.dfa.org.au

Defence Special Needs Support Group

The Defence Special Needs Support Group is the only Australian charity dedicated to providing support, information and assistance to Australian Defence Force families who have someone with special needs.

www.dsnsng.net.au

Defence Housing Australia

Defence Housing Australia was established in 1987 to provide housing for members of the Australian Defence Force and their families.

www.dha.gov.au

Transition Support Services

ADF members planning to leave Defence can attend an ADF Transition Centre to obtain practical guidance and information to help them transition seamlessly into civilian life.

www.defence.gov.au/dco

For more information on this factsheet and other Defence Community Organisation support services visit www.defence.gov.au/dco or call the all-hours Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608.

The Defence Community Organisation offers a wide range of support services for the families of ADF members.

The best way to access these services is to call **1800 624 608**. The all-hours Defence Family Helpline is staffed by qualified human services professionals including social workers and psychologists.

