

From Military Teacher and Spouse to Military Mom: Preparing our children for a Military Move

By Karen Cluley Canadian Teacher, Naples Italy (*Reprinted from 2015*)

Moving can be a tumultuous time for most of us, especially for children; a time full of anxiety and stress. As a former teacher, who has worked in a variety of capacities within military communities, I often had children in my classroom who would experience a military move or who would have frequent deployments of their parent/s at any given time throughout the school year. As a teacher, I would do everything in my power to help these students with the transition into their new situation: open communication with students and their parents, integrated character education and discussions surrounding feelings and emotions into classroom lessons, extra support/resources for students who appeared to be struggling with the change, etc.

At the time, I did not have children of my own but my experiences in the classroom led to many discussions with my military spouse about how we could support our children one day when the time would arise. Now, five years later, I find myself to be a mother of three little ones (two year old twins and a four year old), and preparing for our first military move as a family with children...and not just any military move, an OUTCAN move. My hope in writing this article is to simply share with other parents some of the strategies that my husband and I are using with our young children, in order to make the transition of the military move somewhat easier on our children.

Drawing on my experiences, as a teacher and a mom, it is my belief that children are resilient, but we must equip them with the tools for success. Children look to their parents for cues when faced with new situations. As such, it is important to model positive attitudes and to equip our children with strategies to be able to better handle the stresses of a military move. A friend recently referred to military moves, and all that accompanies them, as “chaos balls” which are thrown our way every couple of years. Well, isn’t that the truth! Children don’t have a choice when or where they move, but they do have a choice about how they will respond to the move. With the proper tools, children can experience a smooth transition to their new location. Listed below are some practical ideas, which I feel are important based on my experiences, to help build resiliency within young children during a military move.

Open Communication: Open communication with your children is key during any type of move. It is important to use age-appropriate language, keeping in mind that the younger the child is, the less they will understand about the whole move process. My four year old is a thoughtful individual. She likes to have things explained to her, then she often takes time to digest conversations and will revisit the discussion with questions she may have. We started talking about our move well in advance, like a year in advance. Being an OUTCAN posting, we had the luxury to lay the groundwork for our move early on. Our OUTCAN posting has been the only “home” that my children have known, so we have been especially careful to emphasize the positives about the move and have shifted the focus from what they are leaving behind to the “new beginning” that we are embarking on as a family. Because we have framed the move in a positive light, the children are excited for our move back to Canada. Obviously, children can have strong emotions, sometimes negative, about their move. This is completely normal and important to acknowledge and discuss these feelings.

Remove the Unknowns: In my experience, I have seen that when the unknowns are removed, children are less worried and are far more open to the move process. By listening to your children and fielding their questions and concerns, they will often experience less anxiety about their move. When children know more about where they are moving to and what the area has to offer them, they tend to feel that they have more control over their situation. Check out how your children can get involved in extracurricular activities in their new community; activities which they are good at and will build confidence within our child. Our children did not accompany us on our HHT, so we ensured that we took a lot of pictures of our new home (the children's bedrooms, the playroom, the yard, etc), their school, the neighbourhood parks, the recreation centre, and many other locations. We have also used Google Earth to explore our new neighbourhood. The internet is a wonderful tool to get to know your next posting area.

Get Involved: Allow your children to be involved in the whole move process. When children are provided with the opportunity to make some decisions, they feel as though they have some control in their situation which has been forced upon them. Our children, as young as they are, have made decisions regarding which toys and clothes they will keep, or pass along to their friends or for donation. We have allowed the children to choose what colour their new rooms will be painted and how their new rooms will be decorated. Another great tool that we have employed, for our four year old, is a move calendar. We printed a calendar and placed clipart on the important days of our move month, i.e. playdates, car shipment, pre-pack, pack, load, travel day, hotel, possession of the new house, etc. Everyday, my little one crosses off another day and does the countdown for the next big day. This tool has been especially helpful, as it has helped turn an abstract concept of moving into a more concrete idea where she can understand how events are going to unfold and ask questions as they arise. We are planning to have our children present during the pack and move days (with a helper to keep them busy), so that they can ask questions of the movers and they can see where their stuff is going.

Make Time for Good-Byes: No one likes good-byes, especially not children who don't understand why someone is leaving or why they have to leave their friends. It is important to allow the time for children to say goodbye in their own way and to whomever they feel they need to say good-bye to. My little one, for example, has made Canada-themed goodie bags for her Italian dance friends and good-bye cards for the grocery baggers at the grocery store. It is also important for children to maintain those old friendships and have opportunities to remain in contact with friends through letters, email, telephone conversations, and/or Skype calls.

Find Support: Every child is unique and will handle the stress of a military move differently. Check out the resources that are available within your community, through your child's school and the Military Family Services. There is a number of booklists available on line, for different age groups, regarding military moves, deployments, and coping with emotions and feelings. As posting season ramps up and move day approaches, I remind myself on a daily basis to slow down and to take the time to listen to my children, in order to have those open discussions and to answer those hard questions surrounding our move. Sometimes, as parents, we need to remind ourselves to model that resiliency that we wish to build in our children and to handle setbacks with grace, as our little ones are listening and watching. By doing so, we can make the transition of a military move easier on our children.