

The Benefits of the Baby Signs[®] Program for Military Families
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Although every family with very young children faces challenges, those faced by military families are particularly daunting. Here are just a few of the special situations that make their lives so stressful.

- **Deployment:** The issue of “separation anxiety”—the emotional reaction young children have to a parent leaving them (even for a short time)—is magnified tenfold when a parent is deployed. Infants and toddlers have a hard time understanding why the separation is necessary and when it might end.
- **Increased Stress Levels:** Military families are plagued by a wide variety of uncertainties—from wondering when the next move will be necessary to worrying about what might be happening to a deployed parent. These uncertainties give rise to high levels of stress for parents that make dealing with the demands of very young children especially challenging. The children, too, feel the stress, making them more likely to sleep poorly, act out, and cling to the remaining parent.
- **Reunification:** Whenever a parent returns from being away for an extended period of time, adjustments are necessary on everyone’s part. Tempers can flare as routines are disrupted, wariness on the part of infants and toddlers toward the returning parent can be disappointing, and young children can feel resentful when the returning parent dominates the stay-at-home parent’s attention.
- **Injured Family Members:** The painful truth is that not all parents return home as healthy (mentally or physically) as they were when they left. Dealing with such situations when there are very young children in the family poses special challenges.

Of course, none of this comes as news to those of you living with these challenges! The good news is that the Baby Signs[®] Program, while not a perfect remedy, can make things a bit easier for those of you dealing with infants or toddlers. That’s why the Department of Defense continues to encourage our work with child care centers on military bases around the world.

How can signing with babies and toddlers before they can talk make life easier for military families? First, let’s consider the proven benefits of the Baby Signs[®] Program as they apply to any family. Signing with babies. . .

- **Reduces tears, tantrums, and frustration:** Because they can use signs to communicate what they need, what they see, and even what they *feel* well before they have words, babies and toddlers are less likely to become upset or angry. Parents, of course, feel less frustrated, too!
- **Builds trust between parent and baby:** Because signing enables parents to meet their baby's or toddler's needs more quickly and effectively, children feel more secure and trusting.
- **Enables babies to share their worlds:** Children of any age love being able to let parents know what they are excited about in the world around them—like butterflies, kittens, or airplanes overhead—and are pleased when parents respond with enthusiasm. Signs enable babies and toddlers to do so before they can use words.
- **Helps babies express emotions constructively.** Signs for emotions—like SAD, AFRAID, and ANGRY—help babies share with their parents (more precisely than crying does) what they are feeling, thereby enabling parents to be more effective in the comfort they provide.
- **Strengthens the parent/infant bond:** Quite simply, when people understand us, we feel connected to them. Babies and toddlers are the same. By helping them communicate with their parents before they can talk, signing helps babies and parents grow closer and more loving.

So, how do these general benefits help military families cope with the specific challenges they face? Let's take those challenges one by one:

Deployment: These days, with Skype making communication from far away places easier than ever, signs enable babies to stay in touch with the absent parent in more rewarding ways than would be possible otherwise. Just think how much more connected a baby will feel to a parent who understands when the baby uses a sign and how thrilled the absent parent will be to enjoy a window into his/her baby's mind despite the miles in between.

Increased Stress Levels: Look at the list of benefits again and you'll see that there isn't one among them that wouldn't help make life easier and more pleasant—thereby lowering tension in the home. Babies and toddlers who sign cry less, are easier to please, feel better about themselves, and feel more loving and secure. Quite simply, signs make life more fun for everyone.

Reunification: The irony is that having a parent away isn't the only thing that causes stress; having him or her come home does so as well! For that reason, all the benefits listed above also help military families deal with reunification. In addition, the fact that the baby has been able to "talk" with the absent parent using signs while the parent was away (via Skype)—and that the parent already understands the baby's "language"—increases the chance that the baby will feel connected to and trusting of the returning parent, thereby making adjustments easier.

Injured Parent: Obviously, dealing with an injured parent raises stress levels even higher. In situations like this, the fact that signs make the normal routines of daily life flow more smoothly is especially helpful. Signs also help substitute caregivers—who may be necessary if the injured parent is hospitalized—interpret the baby or toddler’s needs more easily. And finally, the feeling signs (SAD, AFRAID, and SCARED) can help parents explain the situation to the very young child in simple terms as well as giving the child a way to let parents know how she or he is feeling.

These are just some of the ways that signing can ease the burden of caring for infants and toddlers as military families struggle with the added challenges they face. It’s no wonder, then, in the words of Barbara Thompson, the Director of the Office of Family Policy/Children and Youth within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, that the DoD has “enthusiastically embraced the Baby Signs[®] Program.” Here at Baby Signs, we are trying hard to make it easy for you to do the same.