



Families living separately

Defence Community Organisation

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.

This is called 'Member With Dependents (Unaccompanied)' or MWD(U), and families decide on this option for a range of reasons.

MWD(U) can support family stability, enabling partners to keep their current job, children to stay at their school, and allowing consistent access to healthcare. Choosing to go MWD(U) is an important family decision.

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER FIRST

Before making a decision, families should research the new posting location and discuss the implications of living apart and its possible effect on each family member.

The policies governing MWD(U) and its accompanying entitlements, including information on separation and accommodation allowances, are described in chapter 8 of Defence's [Pay and Conditions Manual](#). Read this chapter thoroughly before making the decision to go MWD(U).

You should have a solid understanding of the reason and purpose for choosing MWD(U), so get the whole family together to discuss the option and work through the [MWD\(U\) worksheet](#). During the harder times, your purpose can help sustain you, so it's important that you're all clear on why you want to become MWD(U).

Having a clear understanding of your reasons and purpose can also help you to create a plan

about how you will actively make living across two households work.

Discuss and plan how to keep in touch while living apart. Planning to share everyday details of life—the highlights, lowlights and mundane—are important building blocks in maintaining family connection.

Work to understand and respect each family member's thoughts and feelings about living separately. Don't assume you each think or feel the same way about it.

Be aware not to place 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.

BE EMOTIONALLY PREPARED

Sharing your emotions can make them feel less intense, and helps you connect with others and feel less isolated. If you avoid talking about emotions and problems they can intensify and problems seem worse.

When you and your family are discussing MWD(U) keep in mind:

- why you are doing it
- who it involves



- when to evaluate how you are going
- what your options are if things aren't working
- when it will finish
- what challenges you can foresee based on personalities, temperaments, likes and dislikes.

People are relatively adaptable once they know what they're facing, so explore as many angles as possible and become familiar with what may lie ahead.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN

Communicate truthfully and openly with your children about the reasons for choosing MWD(U). Prepare them in advance for what is going to happen. Explain clearly where, why and for how long their parent is going away. This helps them to understand and cope with the absence and dispels uncertainties and fears, or belief that the separation is their fault.

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

Involve them in the planning. They can help figure out new roles and responsibilities during their military parent's absence.

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

Encourage them 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 change during parent absence, it can often present in their behaviour or health.

DEALING WITH CHANGE

MWD(U) is a new way of life and requires families to find a way to 'live apart together'—setting up new routines, finding ways to stay connected and involved in everyday moments, continuing to make decisions as a family and establishing new support networks.

Change can bring a period of confusion, disorientation and growth. It's not necessarily the change itself that's difficult, but the process of taking hold of and embracing the new.

Adjusting to the changes of living as MWD(U) and being able to manage throughout the experience requires self-agency and actively planning to cope. Looking after your wellbeing is important, because it's hard to look after your family if you aren't looking after yourself. Directing your focus to active coping, positive thinking and focusing your energy on what you have control over can all help in managing the change and challenges of MWD(U).

RESOURCES AND HELP

- **DCO website**—has a range of information and resources for families experiencing absence for Service reasons, including information about guiding **young children to teenagers** through parental absence.
- DCO also has a range of children's books, available from the Defence Family Helpline to help younger children understand the military lifestyle and develop coping strategies for parental absence.
- SMART programs—FamilySMART, TeenSMART and KidSMART help Defence families to develop their resilience and psychological resources to manage the military way of life.
- Defence Family Helpline—staffed by qualified human services professionals who can provide support, advice and information 24/7 **1800 624 608**
- Professional support—DCO social workers can supply short-term casework and counselling services to help you through any difficulties.
- Emergency support—if an emergency or crisis occurs when an ADF member is absent, the family may access practical assistance and emergency support. We also offer support in times of injury, illness or bereavement.

Defence Community Organisation offers a wide range of support services to ADF members and their families.

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.

