

Deployed in December

Strategies for Celebrating the Holidays When a Spouse is Overseas

By Patricia Ladew, May Institute

Many of us consider December, and its family-centered celebrations of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa, to be “the most wonderful time of the year.” But for military families with loved ones overseas during the holidays, December can be one of the most difficult times of the year. And the challenges are compounded when a child has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Just ask Megan Harpine and Patricia Chadwick.

Megan’s husband, Army Sergeant Matt Harpine, has missed two Christmases with Megan and their sons Jackson, 8, and Colby, 7. Matt, who is stationed at Dobbins Air Reserve Base just outside Atlanta, has been deployed four times since Jackson and Colby were born. The last time he was home for Christmas, Colby had just been diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified. PDD-NOS is one of the five diagnoses on the autism spectrum.

Patricia, “Trish,” and her husband, First Sgt. Chris Chadwick also have a son with PDD-NOS. His name is Logan and he is 3? years old. Logan’s 2-year-old sister Madalyn was born during their father’s last deployment. Chris, who is stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, is currently deployed to Afghanistan and will not be home for the holidays this year.

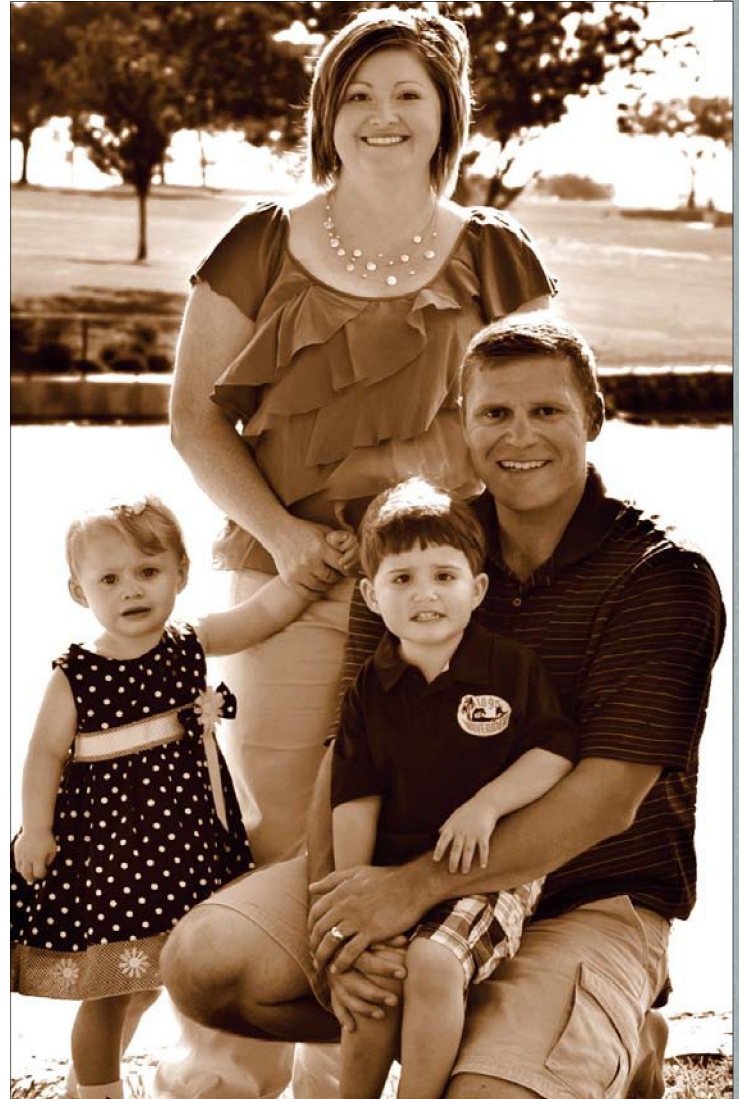
Navigating the holidays

Megan and Trish have more in common than deployed spouses and sons on the autism spectrum. Both are strong, resourceful women who have successfully navigated more than one holiday season as solo parents. Along the way, they learned how to courageously keep themselves together while finding creative ways to make the holidays a little merrier for their young families.

But even while they are doing all that, Megan and Trish must attend to the special needs that accompany their sons’ PDD-NOS diagnoses. Both have learned the importance of flexibility, teamwork, and being especially sensitive to the challenges that often accompany the holidays. And both moms partner up with in-home behavior analysts to help their boys build important skills to more successfully navigate the holidays, and their lives in general.

Creating new traditions

Neither boy tolerates holiday crowds or the over-stimulating sights, smells, and traditional activities of the season very well, so their mothers have found ways to tailor their experiences to their



The Chadwick family enjoys an outing on a sunny afternoon. Pictured (l-r) are Madalyn, Trish, and Chris with Logan. Photo courtesy of Trish Chadwick.

needs. Trish does this by avoiding holiday parties and taking her children for a quiet drive to look at Christmas lights instead.

“It’s something we can do where I don’t have to chase the kids around,” says Trish. “We bundle up, roll the windows down, have some hot chocolate, listen to Christmas music on the radio, and look at the lights. That’s kind of like our Christmas party.”

Megan, like many parents of special needs kids, doesn’t take

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Matt proudly holds sons Jackson (l) and Colby (r) before a deployment to Afghanistan. Photo Courtesy of Megan Harpine.

Colby to parties either. The family attended a Thanksgiving party one year, but found they had to keep Colby secluded. And family dinners are also problematic. Megan has found that joining Colby under the table for Christmas dinner when there's a big crowd makes the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

Trish and Megan would agree that while it can be fun and rewarding to create new holiday traditions, it doesn't make up for their husbands' absences.

"It's been hard sometimes because Logan doesn't understand why his Daddy isn't here," says Trish. "He's always understood that his Daddy is away, he just doesn't understand why. The hardest thing is that Chris misses those 'first times,' like our daughter's first Christmas. They're only little once and you can't really get that time back."

For Megan, asking for help can be one of the hardest things. "People assume that you have it all together, and sometimes you don't. You need help, and it's hard to ask for it. Staying connected with people going through the same thing can make a tremendous difference."

Finding a support system, keeping busy

One way for military spouses to stay connected is to join a Family Readiness Group (FRG), a command-sponsored organization of family members, volunteers, and soldiers who offer each other mutual support and assistance. FRGs give family members a sense of belonging to the unit and community and provide a vehicle for developing friendships. They are also a resource for obtaining information about the unit and the community.

"We have a wonderful FRG," says Megan. The group is a great support. They are other wives who are going through the same thing. We get together and exchange ideas. They put

on Christmas parties for us so our kids can meet Santa. And I have really good neighbors who take the kids so I can go shopping without them. They make sure we're invited to Christmas parties. Whether we go or not, just to be invited means so much. I also have family in the area that I have relied on."

Oftentimes, it's not just the spouse who is far away, but other family members as well. Trish, who is from Ohio, tries not to dwell on the fact that she can't "go home" for Christmas. "You don't think, 'Oh, I wish the family were closer, or I wish we were there,'" she says. "It will make you sad to think that way."

The first Christmas Chris was away, Trish busied herself with trying to make the holidays fun for her kids. "We put up a tree and had the lights and made Christmas cookies," she remembers. "We did all of the things that we would have done if he had been here. I tried to make it fun for them." This year, Trish, Logan, and Madalyn will be setting up a tree and putting a special "Daddy ornament" on it. They'll also be stringing a few lights outside, opening one gift on Christmas Eve, and looking forward to talking to Chris on Christmas Day.

Staying in touch

While support groups, friends, families, and neighbors can all be very helpful when a spouse is deployed, both Megan and Trish stress the importance of staying connected with the deployed spouse via phone calls, e-mail, Skype, sharing recorded books, and exchanging "old-fashioned" letters.

When Matt is deployed, he and Megan write each other letters – just like Matt's grandparents did during World War II. "When Matt's grandfather got home, he brought back a stack of letters," says Megan. "He said they made him feel valued and missed. I wanted to continue that with Matt. It's so impor-

Helpful Hints for Happy Holidays

The holiday season can be a difficult time for military families when a loved one is deployed. It can be even more challenging and stressful for those families who have children with autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities. May Institute behavior analysts offer the following suggestions to help these families make the upcoming days and weeks more enjoyable for everyone.

- Create a “holiday calendar,” or another visual aid that you and your child can use to answer questions about changes in routine (When will I go back to school? How long will Grandma be here? When will it be Christmas?).
- Try to keep the kids busy even when they are not in school. Some sort of schedule, and some structure to the day with clear expectations, can really help.
- Adopt a “less is more” philosophy. Don’t over-extend yourself financially or emotionally. Try to keep your shopping trips, holiday visits, and time at parties short enough that they don’t become tiring or overwhelming.
- Offering choices can help a child actively participate in creating a schedule or plan for the day. She can choose one (preferred) activity over another less preferred activity. “Do you want to see Santa this morning, or get hot chocolate?”
- Know your child’s strengths and deficits. If he has difficulty waiting and taking turns, for example, factor that into your plans (a visit to Santa at the mall might be more successful on a Tuesday morning than a Saturday afternoon).
- Make “practice” visits to a relative’s house, a restaurant, or a church or other place of worship. These visits can ease anxiety and help a child prepare for what could otherwise be a strange and disconcerting new place.

Set clear expectations for your child. Set up a reinforcement system, and be sure to praise her when she meets those expectations.

Be aware that the sights, lights, sounds, and smells of the season may over-stimulate your child and trigger problem behaviors. Anticipate how he might be affected and plan ahead (e.g., bring headphones or sunglasses). Have a “de-escalation” plan in place – teach him how to ask for a break, and know how to help if he begins to “melt down.”

- Remember to schedule breaks and times for parents and siblings to enjoy themselves and do special things as a family.
- Take time for yourself. It’s important to schedule in a few quiet hours every week to relax and “re-group.”
- Practice giving and receiving gifts. Teach your child how to express gratitude. Nonverbal children can use picture icons or hand signs.
- Keep the deployed parent in the picture. Stay in touch with email, snail mail, Skype visits, and holiday packages that include drawings and greetings from the children.
- Ask for help. If you become significantly depressed or anxious during the holiday season, seek professional help. Confidential counseling is available to military spouses.

tant to get those letters – from me and from him. I still have every single letter that he has ever sent me. Just like his grandmother saved hers.”

Maintaining that connection is equally important for the kids. Trish recommends the “United Through Reading” program sponsored by participating commands/units and hosted at USO centers, where servicemen and women can go to be recorded while reading a book. A DVD is made of the reading session and sent to their child at home.

“We also have our own recordable books,” says Trish. “My husband set a little bit of time aside before he left and read stories. Now, if my kids want to hear Daddy read them a story, they have those books.”

Although both families use Skype for voice and video chats via the Internet, they also stay close to their deployed daddies in more homespun, creative ways as well. The Harpine family has “Flat Matt,” a life-size poster of Matt in uniform that they take with them to restaurants, graduations, birthday parties, and on vacation. On Matt’s birthday, they take Flat Matt to his favorite restaurant and, thanks to Colby, “everybody in that restaurant knows that it’s Matt’s birthday and that he is in Kuwait or Iraq or Afghanistan,” says Megan.

The Chadwick family has a “Daddy Doll,” a stuffed doll with Chris’ photo on it. “I ordered that before his first deployment,” says Trish. “So, if the kids want to give Daddy kisses or hugs, they’ve got that doll.”

“There are a lot of things you can do to help your kids get through,” Trish continues. “The better you make things for your children, the better you make things for yourself. But you also know you can’t bring their Daddy back. That’s the frustrating part.”

“The fact is,” says Megan, “it’s really hard. You have the choice to let it all fall apart, or to put your big girl pants on and make the best of a bad situation.”

Meanwhile, life goes on

Both Megan and Trish try to keep things as normal as possible while their husbands are deployed – during the holidays and during the ordinary days as well. Like parents everywhere, they must fit their holiday activities into schedules that are already filled with household and yard chores, shopping and errands, and school events.

Trish and Megan’s busy schedules also include therapy sessions to improve the boys’ social interaction and communication skills. Both boys receive in-home therapy from behavior analysts who work out of May Institute Centers for Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Jessica Spies, M.S., works with Colby; Jesse Engstrom, M.Ed., works with Logan. Both therapists are board certified behavior analysts (BCBAs) who use applied behavior analysis (ABA) methodology – positive reinforcement, teaching in small steps, prompting, and repeated practice – to address the boys’ needs. Jessica works out of the Atlanta May Center in Georgia;

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Jesse works out of the May Center in Killeen, Texas.

[After a military dependent receives an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis, he or she is eligible to receive \$36,000 per fiscal year for ABA services. ABA uses effective, evidenced-based interventions to increase skills and appropriate behaviors and decrease inappropriate behaviors. It is the only treatment reimbursed by TRICARE's ECHO and Enhanced Access to Autism Services Demonstration ("tutor") programs for military families who have children with ASD.]

"Having an in-home therapist has made the biggest difference – not just for Colby, but for our whole family," says Megan. "Not having to battle Atlanta traffic, go downtown two times a week, is number one. Number two is that Colby is in his own home. He doesn't like to leave home."

Wanting to stay close to the security of home is not unusual for children on the autism spectrum, explains Jessica, Colby's behavior analyst. "Colby has trouble leaving the house because it gets him outside of his comfort zone. That means holiday events can be hard, given the change in structure and disruptions to his day."

To help Colby and his family prepare, Jessica is planning some community outings together prior to the holidays. "That way," she says, "I can observe and help with the transitions away from home."

Jessica is also working with Colby on general social skills (how to greet Aunt Mary, for example), and learning to talk with others, not only about his favorite topics (LEGOS, Star Wars, and the Army), but other fun subjects as well. "We're also working on polite game-playing," she says. "Taking turns, and saying nice things to someone when they win and you don't. These are great skills to practice during the holidays when more people are around and there is more family time to play games."

Developing, strengthening relationships

Time together during in-home therapy, and sessions out in the community, reap other rewards. "Colby has really bonded with Jessica, which is something he doesn't do that well," shares Megan. Their relationship allows Jessica to work with him on communication skills; not just verbal language, but using language to express thoughts and feelings.

According to Megan, Colby and Jessica talk about everything, including how he feels about Dad being gone. "We often talk about Colby's dad during our sessions," Jessica confirms, "and sometimes he has questions. My dad was also in the service (the Air Force), so I feel like Colby thinks I kind of understand."

Jesse, Logan's behavior analyst, is working hard to develop a strong relationship with him, too. As she completes her initial assessments, including assessments of Logan's social and language skills, Jesse has made it a priority to bond with Logan by engaging in some of his favorite activities such as piggy-back rides and playful tickling. This time invested in "reinforcer pairing," or pairing herself with activities Logan considers fun, makes it more likely that he will cooperate with

her when she asks him to complete certain tasks during their upcoming sessions.

"Social skills are really important, both for Logan and for his family," says Jesse. "That's a good place for us to begin. We also want to work on behavior challenges he has in different environments. For example, he tends to get over-stimulated and can act out."

"He has a lot of separation anxiety when mom leaves the room," she continues. "I want to work on that too, reassuring him that mom will come back, and that everything is OK."

Jesse and Trish are developing a strong bond. "She's an excellent parent and wants to be involved as much as she can," says Jesse. "There are many behavioral strategies we can work on together. Positive reinforcement techniques like a token system will enable Logan to earn rewards for completing certain tasks."

Jesse is focused on long-term goals for Logan – such as helping him improve his social skills – and is planning on taking advantage of holiday activities to work on these goals. She is putting together a group for the families she serves that will give the children opportunities to interact, and offer the parents as much support as possible during the holiday season.

Special gifts of the season

For the Harpine family, the best gift they will receive this holiday season will be having Matt home for Christmas. When Matt gets off that plane, Colby will be the first one to run to Dad, says Megan. "He has been known to cross that 'do not cross' red line at the Atlanta airport to jump into his Dad's arms. I practically have to pull him off so I can give Matt a hug."

Trish will send Chris a package that has home-made ornaments with the kids' pictures on them. "And I'll put things they may color or paint in the package, so he'll have something from them. We'll probably do cards and have them do their little child writing – to help him know that even though he's not here, we're still thinking of him."

"I'm obviously sad that he's not here," says Trish, "but I'm still thankful that we get to celebrate Christmas as a family – a military family. We have that. And I'm very proud that my husband is serving his country."

Serving Military Families Across the Country

May Institute's Centers for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee/Kentucky, Texas, Florida, Virginia, and New England are dedicated to meeting the immediate and pressing need for services for children with ASD in all branches of the military – Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The Institute plans to continue expansion of its services for military families through new Centers in close proximity to key military installations. •

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