

## **My Father is a Soldier – A Children’s Book**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The wellbeing of the family is an important prerequisite for the soldiers ability to do his/her job in international missions. Through many years social workers and psychologists in the Danish Armed Forces have given lectures and information to relatives before, during and after deployment. The relatives receiving this offer are in this connection limited to partners and girl/boyfriends. But also the children are occupied with questions and considerations about a parent’s deployment for a longer period. Children need to know what is going to happen and they need to know that it is OK to be angry, selfish, to forget the deployed parent, etc. In order to help the children The Royal Danish Defence College has made a children’s book that describes the normal reactions among children being separated from one of their parents. The book is written on basis of research among parents and specialists and describes subjects as anger, communication, worries, disappointments, etc. The text and the drawings inspire to talks between parents and their children between 4 and 7. The book is distributed to all personnel with children in the age group before deployment.*

### **1.0 BACKGROUND**

For a long time there has been a lack of written material for the children of a parent sent abroad in international mission. In Denmark the armed forces give briefings to soldiers and relatives before, during and after deployment but there is almost nothing in particular for children in these briefings. The social workers and the psychologists in Denmark advise personnel and relatives in relation to deployment to international missions and in this connection we frequently meet parents that seek information and advice on how to handle the children’s reactions when one of the parents is absent.

In Denmark we have children’s books dealing with parents work, and we have books that deal with death, and thoughts and reactions to that. We have children’s books that deal with serious illness, etc. But until now we didn’t have a book dealing with the special conditions met by parents with small children when one of the parents is deployed in international mission.

#### **1.1 The birth of the book**

In 2004 the Institute of Military Psychology had the opportunity to employ a young gifted academic out of job for three months. He was commissioned to write the children’s book.

The writer didn’t know anything about working in the Armed Forces or working in international missions. But he knew much about children and about writing for children.

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### **2.0 AGENDA**

The writer started with interviewing parents who had been deployed to international mission about their experiences. He asked the parent at home about the questions the children ask in relation to the other parent being absent and the children’s reactions following the separation.

In addition to this the writer interviewed the Psychologists in the Armed Forces about their experiences with child development and with the kind of problems parents reported and asked for help for in relation to having one parent deployed. The writer also interviewed social workers and experienced writers.

The book was written on basis of these interviews and research.

### **2.1 Principles**

The overall principle in the book has been our wish to tell that it is normal for children to react to an important change in their life, which a deployment of a parent must be considered to be. And that is important that the children are met with acceptance and understanding. It should be allowed for the child to be cross about a father or mother not being home, to be afraid and to be sad and worried. To us it has been important to show some of the normal ways to react, so that the child can hear and see that he/she is not the only one in the world feeling this way. And it has been important to give the parents an opportunity to talk with the child about how it feels. We didn’t want to give the child responsibility for understanding that a parent is out in the big world helping others. Or force the child to take responsibility for other children’s lack of wellbeing.

We wanted the book to be like other children’s books, and not like the usual publications from the Armed Forces. The book should be durable in hard cover and inviting.

### **2.2 From chapter to chapter**

An account of some of the subjects in the book will be given below.

#### **2.2.1 The introduction**

The introduction contains information to the parents on how to use the book. It is designed for children between 4 and 7 and is designed to be read and discussed. It can be used before, during and after deployment. The introduction also contains information to the parents about normal reactions to separation and some good advice on how to handle the situation. Finally there is a reference to means to get in contact with the psychologists in the Armed Forces.

#### **2.2.1 An ordinary Danish family**

In the book called “My father is a soldier” we follow Laura who is four years old. Laura’s father is going to be deployed – we are not told where, but we can see that he is wearing a desert uniform. Laura is told that he is going to be deployed with other soldiers to help some people that are fighting so that they can be friends again. We see Laura and her younger brother, her father and mother. Mother is working in an office in the town, and Laura and her younger brother spend the day in kindergarten.

*We wanted to tell a story about an ordinary Danish family, so that it would be easy to identify with the figures in the story.*

### **2.2.2 Is it dangerous?**

Laura's friend tells her that she on the TV has seen that people get shot in the place where Laura's father is going to work and Laura gets worried that something is going to happen to him.

*It is important to tell the truth and answer the questions asked. But we didn't tell very explicitly about the dangers, and the risks. Only very few Danish soldiers have died in international mission.*

It is impossible for Laura to understand the length of her father's deployment so he tries to make it understandable with a calendar. The perspective of the length is stressed by the fact that her father will not be home for her birthday.

*Children will not at this age be able to understand the perspectives of the parent's deployment. This stresses the importance of making it understandable in a way that a child will understand.*

### **2.2.3 Male and female soldiers**

As Laura's father is going to leave we are introduced to a female soldier.

*Most of the Danish soldiers are male and there are only few female soldiers. Therefore we tell the story about the father being deployed. But we also want to stress that female soldiers serve in the Armed Forces.*

### **2.2.4 How to stay in contact**

Laura's father sends mails from the mission and sends pictures to Laura. She likes the pictures that show where her father sleeps and where he eats. He also sends her pictures of the military cars.

*Children will find pictures of every-day situations most interesting, and they make them get an impression of the life of their parent.*

### **2.2.5 Nightmares**

Laura is in her bed. She cannot sleep and thinks of her father. Finally when she falls asleep she has a nightmare. She dreams that something happens to her father.

Her mother takes her to her own bed where the little brother already is asleep, and she soon falls asleep.

*Children will have mixed feelings in relation to a parent's job in international mission. They will be worried and may have thoughts of death and mutilation. The parents are encouraged to talk with the child about its thoughts and feeling and to give it comfort. The child may regress.*

### **2.2.6 How to tell that about your father's job**

The children in the kindergarten are curious to know what Laura's father is doing when he is not at home. Laura doesn't feel like telling about it so one of the kindergarten teachers tells about being a soldier in international mission. Laura is very happy about this.

*The parents are encouraged to talk with the kindergarten before deployment about the coming situation. This makes it easier for the child to handle the situation. It may be a good idea that the parent before deployment tells about the job to the children so that they know without making too many fantasies.*

### 2.2.7

Laura and her little brother are playing in her father’s chair. She knows that she is not allowed to do that when father is at home.

*Children will have to find out what the situation with one parent in international mission means. Does it mean that things that used to be forbidden still is, does it mean that when father is not at home he still is the one to decide what is allowed and what is not? It is normal for children to find out about the new situation by pushing the boundaries.*

### 2.2.8 Returning home

When Laura’s father finally comes home Laura and her little brother are puzzled and don’t know really what to do. Later Laura wants to play with her father but he wants to be alone. She gets angry with her father and tears the doll he gave her apart.

*Returning from international mission can be difficult in many ways. For the children it can be difficult to understand the parent’s need to be alone, or the need to slowly get back into everyday life. The child will expect the parent to be there for it and it will often be disappointed.*

### 2.2.9 Happy ending

Happy ending. The family is reunited.

The book is distributed before deployment to all personnel with children between 4 and 7 if they want it. The book is available at public libraries and many kindergartens have required it. Our experience with the book is that it is a bestseller.