



First Responders:

Consider Strategies to Address Work Related Parenting Challenges

1. Prioritize transition rituals and boundaries between “work” and “home”

Helps Responder shift modes and children/co-parents recognize you’re home rather than “still at work in your head,” improves parent sensitivity.

- Consistent routine at end of shift (5 minutes in car unwind, change clothes before interacting, de-brief transition conversation)
- Tell fam - “When I walk in the door and do X that means I’m home now.” (Hug, turn off phone, change clothes, etc.)
- Tech boundaries - Decide whether and at what times will check work-related messages, let family know

2. Develop consistent but flexible family routines and stand-in plans

Predictability helps kids feel secure, planned flexible options help when shifts change unexpectedly

- Map out family calendar showing shift hours, absence, time for family
- Decide on “go-to” alternatives as needed (ex: If mom’s shift extended, will do a 10 minute bedtime check in call)
- Plan “anchor points” - like shared meal, bedtime story, weekend outing
- Co-parent/older children take role in routines - “Even when Dad works extra, this part stays the same.”

3. Strengthen communication and check-ins with family

- Weekly or bi-weekly check-ins – what’s working, what’s hard, what do we need this week, appreciations
- “Post-shift” debrief with partner, “What happened, how I’m feeling, how I might show up”
- Kids - “How was your day?” and “One thing I thought about at work that made me glad to come home was...”
- Reflect kids’ feelings
- Use open, non judgemental language – “Sometimes work is heavy. I might be quieter tonight, but I’d love to spend 10 minutes reading or playing.”





4. Prioritize self-care, peer/family support and mental health resources

Parental capacity is impacted by chronic stress, poor sleep, trauma exposure, lack of recovery

- Build consistent safe care habits - sleep/rest, exercise, nutrition, mindfulness/relaxation, non-work hobbies, and boundaries
- Peer support or First Responder family support groups (fam members often feel isolated and lack understanding from “ordinary” support networks)
- Create safety net of resources – therapist who understands the culture, back up child care
- Normalise help-seeking
- Co-parent also needs self-care and understanding support

5. Strengthen resilience in child and family

Children of First Responders have unique challenges (worry about parent safety, irregular schedule, secondary stress)

- Conversations about what parent does - serve community, safety measures, answer all questions
- Teach coping tools – worry box or schedule “worry time”
- Build positive identity – “My parent helps keep others safe”
- Use family resilience frameworks – Problems seen as shared challenges, focus on connection, routines, rituals, humor, family problem solving
- Team mindset – family supports your important work by handling things in your absence

6. Tailor parenting expectations and adapt strategies to unique context

- Be realistic - focus on good enough
- Identify high-impact parenting moments - bedtime, text child before leaving - small rituals count
- Reflect and adjust - periodically ask, “What’s realistic for family connection this month?”

Adapting expectations decreases stress and secondary stress for family.

