



Army Sgt. Brittany Pratt, Army Capt. Lauren Holl, with daughter Isabella, Army Sgt. Wendy D'Angelo, with son Theo, and Army Spec. Katelyn Evans, pose outside the Riverdale Park Army Reserve Center in Riverdale, MD, Dec. 3, 2017. Assigned to the 450th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne), the soldiers are some of the new or expecting mothers in the unit. Photo by Joseph D'Angelo.

By Lauren Holl

The number of women entering the military has steadily increased during the last 30 years. Despite this trend, there continues to be a knowledge gap regarding best practices in supporting Soldiers who return to work after giving birth. In some organizations, this knowledge gap has negatively impacted the overall culture, and contributed to a loss of readiness and retention of qualified and capable Soldiers.

The ten simple suggestions below will enable leaders and first line supervisor to better support Soldiers and nursing mothers in formation when they return to work to help them

stay mission focused. For medical advice, please consult a professional and remember that each woman handles pregnancy and recovery differently.

1- Know the regulations. The Department of Defense encourages breastfeeding up to a year, as it has proven medical benefits. [Army Directive 2015-37](#) and [Army Directive 2015-43](#) describes the commander's role in providing, within reason, logistical support or alternative training plans for Soldiers who are breastfeeding during the first year of her child's life. Each military service has a similar regulation.

2- Research to become knowledgeable. Once a Soldier makes it public that she is pregnant, there are expectations and requirements for leadership, as well as the Soldier. The Commanders Counseling is a must and there are plenty of templates that cover the basics. Use this as an opportunity to discuss what support she expects to require when returning to work. Will child care be an issue? Childcare is only available during certain hours, so her report time and excusal times may need to be adjusted. Does she plan on nursing and therefore need time and a private area to pump? Is there a refrigerator available for her use? The book [Breastfeeding in Combat Boots A Survival Guide to Successful Breastfeeding While Serving in the Military](#) by Robyn Roche-Paull is an excellent resource. Another excellent resource is an [AMEDD Army Public Health Center page on Breastfeeding Resources](#). Discussing logistics with an expectant or nursing mother should not be considered an invasion of privacy, nor should it be an uncomfortable topic.

3- Develop the plan BEFORE the breastfeeding mother returns to work. Physiologically, if a woman is pumping breast milk, it requires discipline, commitment and a certain cadence. This is not an activity to postpone for convenience. Breastfeeding mothers typically must feed or pump every 1.5 to 2 hours. Failure to express the milk can become a very painful medical issue, mastitis, which will take that Soldier out of the fight for treatment.

4- Be considerate. Maternity represents significant change, physically and emotionally, and requires time for recovery. If a Soldier seems overly emotional, do not assume “weakness.” She may still be healing. Emotions go haywire during pregnancy and can take moms some time to re-adjust and re-balance once the baby is born.

5- Talk to the Soldier or ensure her first line leader does. Breastfeeding is a way of life and should not be an uncomfortable topic. Sadly, because it is among those topics so often avoided in formation, many women feel isolated and alone when they return to work. Do not allow Soldiers to feel that way - find someone to make sure that Soldier knows she is supported.

6- Provide a place for your Soldier to express breast milk. Designate a private and clean space, not a bathroom, so she may go when needed. This allows for a smoother battle rhythm to take place. Per [Army Directive 2015-37](#), Commanders will designate a private space with locking capabilities, an electrical outlet and access to a safe water source for Soldiers to express milk.”

7- Be creative. Did you know you can purchase a mobile breastfeeding tent and 3K generator cheaper than the cost of a GP Small? With a Government Purchase Card and a justification supported by Army regulations, such purchases are possible. If there is no office to designate, or the unit is training in the field, find an innovative solution. Engage the women in the ranks to recommend a solution.

8- Bathrooms and locker rooms are not places for breastfeeding or pumping. These areas, while spacious, are neither clean nor private. If the designated space within a restroom is fully enclosed and has a separate and private area for breastfeeding or expressing milk, it would be acceptable. The Army Directive 2015-43 guidance clearly identifies acceptable spaces; a bathroom stall is not it.

9- Be respectful. Many Soldiers are eager to return to working with their teammates, while juggling the responsibilities of being a mother to an infant. Communicate with her to identify her needs. Maybe she needs to drive her POV to training, so she can use the car adaptor and store her breast milk cooler in the car. She may need her training front loaded or partially excused so she can address her other obligations. Alternatively, she may prefer supporting the training activity from a more accommodating location. Infants grow to become capable recruits. Their mothers are very capable of making a difference in the unit. They just need time and respect.

10- Words matter. Terms such as issue, problem, or situation to describe pregnancy, nursing or recovery counterbalance any unit recruiting and retention activity. A Soldier's baby should be a source of pure joy and happiness. Words that negate and belittle the discipline and commitment required of a mother and Soldier forces her to choose between two values. That choice is frequently a losing proposition for the Army.

With a little education and compassion, leaders can help new mothers continue serving their units with minimal impact. Through open dialogue and basic understanding about the logistics that breastfeeding requires, we can better support the women in our ranks. This will increase retention and resilience among our Soldiers who become mothers.

Lauren Holl is a Captain in the United States Army Reserve currently serving with the 450th Civil Affairs Battalion. She is married to an active duty spouse and recently returned from their assignment in Europe where they had their first child. Lauren became an advocate for breastfeeding while traveling with her little one and seeing the discrepancies between civilian, predominantly European model, and challenges still faced by young mothers in the military.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the author's unit, the Army Reserve,

10 Things You Should Know About Supporting Breastfeeding Soldiers

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