

Homecoming Tips for Families With Children

As service members head home after deployment, they must learn how to transition from deployment to life back home. Just as service members must adapt, families of service members also go through a transition.

There is a natural adjustment period for all military members and families after deployments. You should expect this adjustment period during which family members may have feelings of excitement, nervousness, anxiety and concern.

Depending on the length of the separation, family changes may have occurred during deployment. Family roles have adapted, children have grown and developed, likes and dislikes have changed and new friends and relationships may have been established during the deployment. The best advice for successfully managing these changes and transitioning back to home life is to be flexible, prepared and patient with the readjustment process.

Helping Children Reconnect

Reunions are an exciting time, but they can be confusing for children of all ages. They may be happy, worried, scared and excited. Rebuilding trust and closeness takes time. Children desire a close relationship with their returning family member, but they may be unsure of what to do or how to react. Even though a parent's long absence may be a source of emotional strain for the children, as well as the parent, it's possible to work together to rebuild that special relationship.

The homecoming of the service member is a major change for the children in the household. They have grown physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually during the deployment. Children are not as skilled at coping with their stress in part because they have less experience doing so. As a result, they may temporarily act out or regress to a less mature stage of behavior as a part of their reaction. As well, the entire family may face a 4- to 6-week readjustment period.

Children will respond to your reunion differently depending on their emotional development:

- Children under the age of 5 may act out more than normal. They may be shy, clingy, demanding or have feelings of guilt thinking they “made Mom or Dad go away.”
- Children between the ages of 5 and 12, may respond more joyously; boasting about the returning service member to others, talking nonstop about what has been happening in their lives, or they may feel ashamed that they were not “good enough” during their time apart.
- Youth between the ages of 12 and 18, may also respond joyously; exhibiting excitement about the return home. Teenagers will have changed emotionally and physically. By the time the reunion occurs, they may feel “too old” to greet their returning parent as they arrive home. Try not to take offense to any reactions they may have.

The way you react and respond to these various reactions is an important part of a successful reunion. The following techniques will help you respond to the various reactions of children through the development cycle:

Younger Children (Ages 1 to 5)

DON'T

- Force hugs or playtime
- Rush them into trusting you

DO

- Give them time to warm up
- Sit or kneel at their level
- Listen to what they tell you
- Find out their new interests
- Play together when the time is right

School Aged Children (Ages 5 to 12)

DON'T

- Criticize past negative behaviors

DO

- Allow them to brag about you
- Spend time reviewing school work, pictures, scrapbooks, etc.
- Praise them for their accomplishments during your deployment

Teenagers (12 to 18)

DON'T

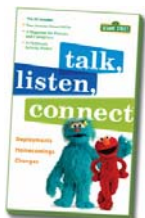
- Force them into spending time with you
- Encourage their disinterested and disrespectful behavior
- Criticize new interests or friends

DO

- Listen with undivided attention
- Have respect for their privacy and friends
- Encourage them to share what has happened during deployment

Programs and Initiatives Focused on Reunions after Deployment

Various organizations have developed programs and initiatives specifically focused on helping families successfully manage the reunion process after deployment. These activities are especially helpful in starting conversations about the challenges of deployment and reunions. Programs are available to assist families with children of all ages from toddlers to teenagers. Below is a list of programs and initiatives that can be useful to military families:



Talk, Listen and Connect: Helping Families Cope with Military Deployment features the Sesame Street character Elmo dealing with the prolonged absence of his father. It is suitable for ages 3 to 5, and is available from Sesame Street Workshop.

Mr. Poe and Friends Discuss Family Reunion after Deployment uses cartoon characters to address deployment issues affecting children ages



6 to 11. For more information about this resource and many others, visit the Military OneSource Web site.

Teens Coping With Military Deployment is a resource parents can use as a tool to help teenagers learn to cope and accept military deployment. Here parents will find teen guides, videos and educational fact sheets focused on signs and symptoms of depression and the deployment cycle. Visit the Military HomeFront Web site for more information.

Special Family Circumstances

Returning Home to a New Baby

Returning home to a new addition to the family can be especially delicate. If you were away for the birth or the first year of your baby's life, you'll be coming home to a whole new family. Be aware of the changes:

- **Feelings of jealousy may exist because of the attention given to the infant or there may be feelings of guilt for being away during the pregnancy and birth.** Accept two facts: the separation was inevitable, and the infant's needs demand attention. Take an active role in caring for the child as soon as possible.
- **Baby's needs come first, and they're expensive.** Be prepared for a much tighter budget.
- **Other children may feel lost with all the changes and need help coping.** Make sure to spend quality time with your older children.

Single Parents

In addition to the joy and stress parents feel when returning to children after a long absence, single parents may feel particularly anxious about the bond formed by the child and the temporary caregiver. Here are some tips for transitioning back home in these types of situations:

- **Communicate openly and frequently with both the caregiver and the child.**
- **Involve the caregiver in the transition.** Forcing the child to suddenly separate can be just as traumatic as when you left.
- **Ask how things were done while you were gone.** It will help you plan how to ease your child back into your rules and schedules.
- **Ask your child about his or her feelings regarding your "new" relationship and how life at home should be.** The changes in caregivers and living arrangements may make children feel as though they have no control over their lives. Assure them that you will be a family again.

Communication Tips

Communicating with family members is an important part of the reunion process. Here are some suggestions to try when communicating with your family about deployment and reunions:

- **Be patient:** Give yourself and your family time to readjust to your return.

- **Be observant:** Examine your family's new schedules and routines before suggesting changes.
- **Be realistic:** Family members have grown physically, emotionally and socially.
- **Be firm:** Try not to give in to all of your children's demands out of guilt.
- **Be flexible:** Expect things to have changed – try things the new way.
- **Be open:** Discuss your feelings, thoughts and concerns.
- **Be generous:** Spend quality time with your family. Your family will go through a readjustment period that may take at least four to six weeks. Keep in mind that spouses and children are unique and manage stress and change differently. If you have concerns about your family's adjustment, seek professional assistance.

Moving Forward

The time following deployment is an important stage for military families. Patience, communication, respect, flexibility and love are critical to successfully reconnecting as a family. With a little preparation and education, homecoming can be a memorable experience and an opportunity to improve your relationships with your loved ones.