

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



HOMECOMING

RECONNECTING AFTER SEPARATIONS



Photo: Department of Defense

This brochure focuses on how you can help your baby or toddler feel secure during homecoming by having realistic expectations as family members reconnect and you begin to discover your “new” normal. Choose an idea or two to support your child, your family, and yourself.

When it's time to come home, what's on your mind is if your child will know you when you walk in the door: Will she turn away? What if she doesn't talk to me?

I had to turn off my emotions to survive in Iraq. Now I have to turn them on again. I love my family, but it's going to take time.

Overview: Be Realistic, Give Yourself Time

How do you envision homecoming day? Sunshine, music playing, joy, smiles, and hugs for everyone? It may be that way. Then again, it may be pouring, and your child may be cutting a tooth and cranky. You may find yourself feeling angry at the spouse you have been missing desperately.

It seems that if saying goodbye is so difficult, saying hello should be easy, and sometimes it is. However, homecoming can also be a time of tension, confusion, and disappointment whether you are returning or have been the one at home.

For your child, homecoming means big changes. There is someone “new” at home to get to know. The adult she depended on all these months is likely to be preoccupied. Familiar routines are probably changing. She may need your reassurance at a time when you are feeling in need of a hug yourself.

Change can be difficult for a young child who is just beginning to develop his picture of the world. He relies on you to buffer him from the stresses that are a natural part of homecoming. The more steady and secure you feel, the better able you are to offer him comfort and support.

Supporting your child during homecoming begins with you—your attitudes and expectations. Understanding that reconnecting takes time and accepting that homecoming can be a sometimes joyous, sometimes “bumpy” ride, can allow you to relax a little, even as you experience the ups and downs of being all together again. It can help you feel more confident that over time everything will be OK. Your child senses this as you hold, talk with, and play with her. It comforts her. It comforts you.

WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

To support your child, begin by trying to understand your experiences and feelings.



Researchers have identified a cycle of deployment. It includes five stages. This brochure focuses on the last two: redeployment and postdeployment.

- **Predeployment** is the time before deployment.
- **Active deployment** lasts from departure through the first month or so of deployment.
- **Sustainment** lasts until the month before the Service member returns home.
- **Redeployment** is the month before the Service member returns home. This is a time of deep and mixed feelings.
- **Postdeployment** begins with the arrival home and typically lasts 3 to 6 months. A “honeymoon” period often follows the return. As the days and weeks go by, parents are faced with the challenge of having to rebalance and renegotiate roles and responsibilities. This can be a rich opportunity to assess and make positive changes in their relationship for the future.



A survey recently conducted by the National Military Family Association (NMFA) reveals that families experiencing multiple deployments think about deployment as a “spiral.” This describes their feeling of never getting back to the place they started as they reunite knowing another deployment is coming.

Having names for different stages of deployment or having the image of a spiral in your mind can be helpful. Although you and your family will experience homecoming in your own way, these models may offer some comfort of knowing what to expect and that you are not alone in your feelings.

The weeks before homecoming are a time of great anticipation and excitement. They can also be a time of worry. You may be concerned about your relationship: “What will we say?” “How has my partner changed?” “Will we get along after being apart for so long?” and “How will responsibilities be shared at home now?”

You may be anxious about how your child will respond. An often unspoken question left hanging in the air is, “Will your child remember?”

If your child was born during deployment, you may wonder what it will be like to be together as a family for the first time. There’s no one way it should be—no right or wrong. A new father meeting his baby might fall instantly in love. He might feel comfortable taking on caregiving responsibilities right away, or he may need time to get used to his baby and to being a dad. These responses are all normal, and new fathers need to be supported. So do spouses who have been looking forward to relief from child

Reconnecting in the Face of Multiple Deployments

It can hurt to say hello and reconnect when you know you are going to be separated again soon. Many people withdraw, step back, and protect themselves. Sometimes putting this into words can help—at least a little—making it possible to consider “being there” and connecting.

A Service member who just arrived home and is preparing to deploy again says it can help to think about homecoming this way: “If you were preparing for a famine, would you starve yourself, or try to fill up on healthy food? It’s that way with relationships, too. When you know you are going to be apart again, it’s like a famine is coming. I try to fill up by being with my wife and our 2-year-old son. When I go back to Iraq, that’s what will keep me going.”

The Reality of Homecoming May Not Match Your Dream. Why?

- You may be very tired. It can be hard to sleep well when looking forward to such a big event.
- Your partner may look or act differently than you remember.
- It can feel awkward talking in person with your spouse after so many months apart.
- Service members need time and may even need professional help to adapt to life at home—especially if they have been in a combat area.
- Meeting a new baby for the first time can be joyous and overwhelming. It can take time to feel like a parent.
- Older babies, toddlers, and twos are developing the ability to remember. It can take time for them to feel comfortable with their returning parent. It can also take the returning parent time to feel comfortable being alone with his or her child.
- Issues in your relationship that existed before deployment are still there.

care responsibilities. Be patient with yourselves and each other.

Homecoming day finally arrives. You may say hello for the first time on the installation, with flags flying, or in the living room under a “Welcome Home” sign complete with your toddler’s scribbles. You’ve dreamed of this day for months. It may turn out as you hoped. Or maybe not.

Finding your “new” normal. The first weeks and months all together again can be a challenging time. It can also be an opportunity to renegotiate roles and to connect with each other and your child in new ways.

Being patient and expecting that homecoming can be amazing, loving, confusing, and at times, overwhelming is the first step in supporting your child.

The next step is thinking about what homecoming means to him.

WHAT YOUR CHILD MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

Next, try to understand what your child experiences and feels.

Your child may smile and/or reach for or run toward the parent she hasn’t seen for so long.

Then again, your child may act shy, even fearful, or break into tears, leaving you and your spouse feeling heartbroken, confused, guilty, or sad. These behaviors are not a measure of your child’s love. They are typical behaviors of a young child who has not seen an adult for a long time.

How your baby or toddler responds to homecoming depends largely on his age, personality, and the support you give him. Here are a few basics of child development research that can help you better understand some of his reactions to homecoming:

- **Most babies go through stages in which they can be fearful of “new” people including family members they haven’t seen for awhile.** This is especially true around 7–9 months of age. Although this can be hard to take if you are the family member greeted with a stare or tears, it shows that your child knows and recognizes the people she trusts and depends on day by day, which is a big step in her development.
- **Young children are still developing the ability to remember.** Many toddlers are able to hold a picture of their loved adults in their minds. However, stress and tension—often part of homecoming—can make it difficult to recall these memories.
- **Children differ in how easily they adapt to new people and situations.** It is easier for some than for others. For some, it takes a very long time.

What do you think?

How does your child respond to new people and situations?

- What kinds of things do you say and do to support him?
- How does he respond?
- How can you use what you already know about your child to prepare and support him during homecoming?

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

Finally, use what you have learned to decide how best to respond.

Here are some steps you can take to support your child during homecoming. As you will see, they all involve being realistic about this important time in your lives and taking the time you need to think, talk, and be together as a family.

Getting Ready

You set the stage for making homecoming work for all of you when you:

- **Talk together about homecoming.** Talking before the return can help you begin to connect. Topics you may want to discuss include the following:
 - o Who you want to see the first day and first weeks home
 - o Foods you want to eat
 - o Activities you want to do together
 - o Your feelings about being back together again
- **Prepare for mixed and intense feelings.** Even positive change can be stressful and lead to strong and sometimes confusing feelings.
- **Tell your toddler or 2-year-old what is going to happen a day or two before.** This way you can give her a sense of comfort that comes with knowing what to expect, and you will avoid disappointment and confusion if homecoming is delayed.

On Homecoming Day

To support your child on this big day:

- **Follow your child's lead.** Is he smiling? Looking at the returning parent in the eye? Reaching his arms out? He may be telling you he is ready to be picked up by the returning



parent. Is he looking away? Clinging to the parent who has been home with him? He is telling you he needs some space and time. As the mother of a toddler says about returning home, "Let your child set the pace of reconciliation even though it might be killing you inside."

- **Adjust your celebration to fit your child.** Is she easily overwhelmed in a crowd? Consider dinner at home and hanging out in the backyard. Is she tired and cranky? Maybe she needs a nap before family members arrive.
- **Keep things simple.** This is not the day to try out a fancy new recipe or worry that your child's pants are torn. The most important thing is to focus on him and being together.

The Days and Weeks After Homecoming

Homecoming can't be hurried. Feeling connected again can take time and isn't always easy, no matter how much you love that person, no matter your age. You can support your child when you spend time all together, work together to parent, talk about your approach to discipline, and are aware of rising tension.

Appreciate the little things in life and being together:

There's no more important thing you can do to support your child than be with her:

- **Spend time all together.** This gives your child the support of his parent who was home while he starts feeling comfortable

with the parent who has just arrived home.

- **Enjoy everyday moments.** Sit with your baby in the rocking chair, sing a silly song, tell a story to your toddler, build with blocks, or make a pudding pie.
- **Focus on now, not on making up for one of you having been away.** Your child doesn't need an expensive toy or trip to a theme park. She needs time with you.
- **Arrange for the returning parent and your child to spend small amounts of one-on-one time together and slowly build over time.** You might start with the parent who was home going into the kitchen. Slowly, as your child and the returning parent reconnect, give them the chance to go to the park or to a playgroup together.
- **Keep your sense of humor.** Everyone will benefit.



Work on Your "Parenting Partnership"

Parenting requires teamwork. Together you are your child's base of security. When you pay attention to how you work together, you will have more to give to your child.

► If you are the parent who has been at home:

- **Be aware that it can be difficult at first to share your child and her affection.** No matter how much you have been longing for your spouse's return, you may feel resentful about sharing your child's smiles and hugs. It's normal.
- **Avoid assuming the role of "expert."** You have lots of information to share. It is most helpful if you do so as a partner.
- **Be realistic about taking a break.** Although you've been looking forward to some time on your own, your spouse and

child need you there as they reconnect.

- **Send your child the message that you are a family by talking about your returning family member and including them in daily routines.** For example, "I'm happy Mommy is home. Let's ask her to read the story tonight," or "Let's show Daddy how you wash your tummy when you take your bath."

► If you are the returning parent:

- **Thank your partner for taking care of your child and managing life on the homefront.** Showing your appreciation is important, even if there are some things you wish had been handled differently.
- **Remember that the parent at home has been your child's base of security.** This can help when he clings to this parent or insists this parent stay nearby at first while you are reading or playing together.
- **Spend time at home.** If you are not there, you cannot reconnect. It may sound simple, but Service members often want to be with their comrades who have experienced deployment, too. Talk with your partner about how you can make time for both.

Talk Together About How You Will Guide Your Child's Behavior

Sometimes returning parents may not want to set limits, trying to make up for being away. Other times a returning parent might step in too quickly, firmly trying to regain authority and a sense of control. The parent who has been at home may feel resentful about having to continue handling discipline and/or having someone take over. Think

What do you think?

Here is how some parents have described how it feels to reconnect with their young child:

- We are "in sync." We find our own rhythm.
- I know how she is feeling just by looking at her.
- I know I can take good care of him—and he knows it, too.

How does reconnecting with your child feel for you?

together about ways in which you can discipline and, at the same time, help your child feel loved, valued, and competent.

Finally: Be Aware of Rising Tension

As your family settles in together, it is possible that there will be some tension and arguing. This is to be expected. You are going through a major life transition. You may be experiencing the effects of combat/operational stress injuries. (For more on this, see the brochure *Combat Stress*.)

However if you have any concern about arguments increasing to the point of physical violence, follow your instincts and leave your home immediately with your child. Contact the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) on your installation for information and resources to support you and your family.

Guiding Behavior in Positive Ways

When you guide behavior in ways that show respect and help children feel good about themselves, you help them begin to develop self-discipline. You might, for example:

- Prevent a dangerous behavior when you give a child a plastic cup to drink from instead of a glass.
- Prevent unacceptable behavior when you move the flowerpot out of reach to prevent a child from digging in the soil.
- Redirect a child's behavior when you give your baby one of her board books to chew instead of the book your spouse is reading.
- Acknowledge and model positive behavior by saying "thank you" when your baby offers you one of her crackers.
- Set a few clear and simple rules, such as "Remember, we don't yell in the house," knowing it will take time for your toddler to learn to follow them.
- Step in when necessary to stop a dangerous behavior such as biting or throwing a wooden block.

The Little Things You Say and Do Can Make a Big Difference—In a Child's Words

When you . . .	You help me . . .
Plan for all of us to do activities together—so I can be with the parent who has been with me and the parent who is just returning home	Feel secure to start reconnecting.
Give me words for what I am feeling (e.g., "Are you feeling worried about all the changes around here?")	Feel understood. Learn it is OK to feel what I feel.
Talk about things we have done and will do together ("Do you remember how we liked to go down the slide in the park? Maybe we can all go to the park together tomorrow.")	Feel comfortable and connected.
Stay patient and calm when I am upset—even if you are feeling upset, too.	Regain control and feel safe.
Tell me what is happening in simple words (e.g., "I was away for a long time and now I came back. I love you.")	Understand the big changes in our life.
Talk together, support each other, and believe everything is going to be OK	Feel more relaxed and happier because you feel that way, too.





Photo: Photodisc

Remember the Wonder of the Everyday

Taking time to - enjoy telling a story, feel the sun on your face as you take a walk, make “eensy-weensy” spiders with your fingers, play “Where is your tummy?” eat a sweet juicy peach, watch an ant on the sidewalk, run through the sprinkler, sail a boat in the bathtub, collect leaves, watch a flag blow in the breeze, climb up and go down a slide - gives all of you the chance to enjoy being together and to reconnect.

Resources for Families

MilitaryHOMEFRONT: www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil is the official Department of Defense website for reliable quality of life information designed to help troops and their families, leaders, and service providers.

Military OneSource: www.militaryonesource.com is available 24/7 to connect families with services including car repair, money management, child care, spouse employment, counseling, and relocation. Or call 1-800-342-9647.

ZERO TO THREE: www.zerotothree.org offers a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military

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