

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



# TRANSITIONS RETURNING TO CIVILIAN LIFE



**T**his brochure focuses on how you can help your baby or toddler feel secure during your family's transition to civilian life by having realistic expectations as you find your balance. Choose an idea or two to support your child, your family, and yourself.

- *When its time to return to civilian life you worry if your service experience has changed your ability to be a loving parent.*
- *"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

**S**upporting your child during this transition begins with you—your attitudes and expectations. Adjusting to life away from the military takes time; accepting that this transition can be a sometimes joyous, sometimes “bumpy” ride can allow you to relax a little, even as you experience the ups and downs of re-entering civilian life. 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.

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 transitions. The more steady and secure you feel, the better able you are to offer him comfort and support.

For your child, the transition to civilian life means big changes. If you were deployed prior to leaving active service, there may be someone “new” at home to get to know. The adult she depended on all these months may be preoccupied with the tasks of transitioning from a military family to a Veteran family. Familiar routines are probably changing. She may need your reassurance at a time when you are feeling in need of a hug yourself.

## WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

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

**E**very Veteran—and family—experiences this major life transition in their own personal way. Yet many describe it as a time of ups and downs.

*“We were excited that my husband didn’t have to deploy anymore, he was home safe. Yet, he seemed lost somehow. He told me he didn’t feel like his work mattered anymore, he was no longer making a difference in the world.” —A Veteran’s Spouse*

Transitions take time. They are not a task that can be checked off the TO DO list as “done”. There may be times when you feel out of balance: lost, confused, and unsure and stressed. There will also be times you feel the pride and pleasure of moving ahead and finding your balance as an individual and as a family.

Because parenting a baby or toddler is a big job even when life is at its smoothest, we wrote this guide for you. An easy read, it can help you understand what your child may be experiencing so that you can decide what to say and do to support your child as you and your family move through this new stage of your lives.



## The Reality of Transitioning to Civilian Life May Not Match Your Dream. Why?

- You may miss the intensity and excitement of military life, and adjustment to civilian life may seem “boring.”
- You may miss your buddies from your unit and feel isolated in your home in the civilian community.
- You may be tired—it is taxing and hard to sleep when anticipating discharge and a major life transition
- It can feel lonely not having other Service members with you to discuss your experiences. You may feel uncomfortable sharing those experiences with civilians, or even feel uncomfortable sharing them with your spouse.
- Veterans need time and may even need professional help to adapt to life out of active military service
- Older babies, toddlers, and twos are developing the ability to remember. It can take time for them to feel comfortable with you being at home more and assuming more of their care.
- It can take you time to feel comfortable being alone with your child. You may have relied on your spouse to do most of the care while you were deploying frequently. It may seem awkward taking on the role of primary caregiver for your child.
- Issues in your significant relationships that existed before discharge or deactivation are still there.

### Finding Your Balance

The first weeks and months transitioning out of military service can be a challenging, amazing, loving and confusing time. It can also be an opportunity to renegotiate roles and to connect with each other and your child in new ways. Giving yourself and your family time to adjust is the first step in supporting your child.

## WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

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

This chart—in a child’s voice – gives you possibilities about what your child’s behavior might be telling you and how you might respond:

### Readjusting/ Transitioning to Civilian Life . . . in a Child’s Words:

At Separation From Military Service:		
When I . . .	I may be saying . . .	How you can support me
Look a little confused.	What’s going on here?	Tell me what is happening in clear and simple words. “Mommy is coming home and this time she is staying home with us.”  Give me a way to participate. Invite me to draw a welcome-home picture, help you dust the coffee table and water the plants, or bake her favorite cookies.
Cry, hesitate, pull away from, act afraid of my Veteran parent who has just come home	I need time to get to know you again and to feel safe and at ease with you.	Follow my lead.  Let’s spend time <i>all together</i> —you who have been with me and you who just came home.  Try not to be upset. It doesn’t mean I don’t love you. I need time to remember and reconnect.  Offer me the chance to look at you and play with you—smile at me, offer me a toy, sing me a silly song.
Cry and get fussy when there is a lot of noise and/or people around	It’s upsetting—it’s hard for me to take it all in.	Keep my daily routines consistent.  Keep our celebrations small and simple. At least, protect me from too much sound and activity. Maybe someone I know and trust can be with me in a quieter place.

### As We Settle Into A Daily Routine

When I . . .	I may be saying . . .	How you can support me
Look sad or withdraw, am more clingy than usual, or revert to old behaviors like wetting my bed.	I feel tension. I sense something is going on.	Offer me simple, clear words for what is happening: “Daddy is getting used to being back at home.”  Try to keep my daily routines the same. Keep my mealtimes, bath time and bedtime the same. Sing my favorite songs with me.  Offer me a hug. Let’s read a book in the rocking chair or play together.  Can you arrange for us to spend some family time together? I’d like that.
Ask where Daddy is going today or look worried when mommy or daddy leave the house or even the room.	I’m trying to understand what’s going on and feel a little in control of my life. I’m afraid he will leave again for a long time.	Invite me to help do something like draw a picture for Daddy to keep in his pocket while he looks for a new job.

*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 this transition?

## Adjusting to Changes Like a New Place to Live or a New Child Care Program

When I . . .	I may be saying . . .	How you can support me
<p>Go back to earlier behaviors like crying for my bottle, sucking my thumb, or wetting my pants.</p> <p>Look sad or withdraw.</p>	<p>All these changes are hard for me.</p>	<p>Try to be patient with me. I'm doing what I need to do while I adjust to big changes in our life.</p> <p>Offer me simple, clear words for what I may be feeling: "You look sad. Are you missing Ms. Lisa who used to take care of you?"</p> <p>Try to keep my daily routine at home the same. Unpack and set up my crib or bed, high chair and some of my toys. Sing the same song at bedtime.</p> <p>Tell my new teacher about me so she can take good care of me: what I like to do and eat, what upsets me and how to comfort me, any allergies.</p> <p>Talk to my new teacher about how to help me adjust. Try to spend some time at my new program with me.</p> <p>Offer me a hug. Let's sit together in the rocking chair.</p> <p>Tell me stories of things we used to do in our old home or my old child care program. Show me photos of people I might be missing.</p> <p>If you feel concerned that I seem "flat" or show no emotion, talk to my doctor.</p>

When I . . .	I may be saying . . .	How you can support me
<p>Cling, kick, scream when you say "goodbye" —even if it's only for an hour and I'm with someone I know and like.</p>	<p>Life feels a little uncertain. I need you. I depend on you to keep me safe.</p>	<p>Give me a little warning, then tell me when you are going away. Yes, I may cry, but I'm learning that I can trust you not to abandon me.</p> <p>Leave me with someone I know and trust.</p> <p>Reassure me that you will come back just like you always do.</p> <p>If possible, tell me when you're coming back in a way I can understand, such as, "I'm going to be back after your nap."</p> <p>Give me a reminder of you to hold—a photo of us, your T-shirt or cap, a note</p>
<p>Hit or bite you—or another child.</p>	<p>Sometimes I'm angry, or I have so many feelings inside and no words for them that I lose control.</p>	<p>Stop me firmly and gently. Tell me "It's not OK to hit or bite." Remind me it hurts. Never bite me back!</p> <p>Show me what I <i>can</i> do when I get angry or frustrated. Help me to name my feelings.</p> <p>Remember, I will need lots of help and time to learn self-control.</p>
<p>Giggle, laugh, play like always.</p>	<p>I have so much to see, to do, to learn and enjoy.</p>	<p>Spend time with me. Play with me. Delight in what I'm doing. Enjoy me and our time together.</p>



## SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

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

**H**ere are some steps you can take to support your child by 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 the return to civilian life work for all of you when you:

- **Talk together.** It is a chance to reconnect and feel the security of knowing you are all on the same team. You may want to talk about:
  - Who you want to see in the first days and weeks of your civilian life
  - The possible move to a new home
  - Activities you want to do together like go on a picnic or make a snow person
  - Activities you will do on your own such as return to work, seek a job or explore child care options
- **Prepare for mixed and intense feelings.** Even positive change can be stressful and lead to strong and sometimes confusing feelings.

### The First Days and Weeks of Civilian Life

You support your child when you appreciate the little things in life and being together:

- **Follow your child's lead.** Pay attention to the expressions on his face, his movements and his sounds and words to help you gauge his moods, needs and interests. Is he smiling? Reaching his arms out to you? He may be saying, "You can pick me up." Is he looking away after you have been playing peek-a-boo for awhile? He may be saying, "I need a break."

- **Spend time all together.** *If the Veteran has just returned from a deployment, this is especially important.* This gives your child the support of his parent who was home while he starts feeling comfortable with his parent who was away.
- **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 a trip to a theme park. She needs time with you.
- **If your child is getting reacquainted with the returning parent after a long separation, arrange for that 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.** Laughter is good for everyone.

### Your "Parenting Partnership"

Talking about parenting together will allow you to help your child feel safe and secure, strengthen your relationship and free her to play, explore and learn:

#### For both of you:

You have grown and changed during your military service. Your Veteran spouse/partner may be experiencing physical or emotional pain or injury. The more you can talk together about your concerns, hopes and dreams for your child, the better it will be for all of you.

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

- **Be aware that it can be difficult at**

*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?

**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 especially following a lengthy deployment.
- **Talk about your returning family member and include 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 Veteran parent:**

- **Thank your partner for taking care of your child and managing life on the homefront as you worked long hours and had to leave home frequently.** 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.
- **Talk with your partner to find a balance between spending time at home and getting the support you need from other Vets.** This can help assure that you can be present when you are at home.

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

Sometimes after transitioning out of the military, parents may not want to set limits, trying to make up for being away so often. Other times a Veteran 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 together about ways in which you can discipline and, at the same time, help your child feel loved, valued, and competent.

#### **Guiding Behavior in Positive Ways**

When you guide behavior in ways that show respect and help your young child feel good about herself, you help her 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, yet common, behavior** such as biting or throwing a wooden block.

#### **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 ZERO TO THREE's brochure *Combat/Operational Stress*.)

However if you have any concern about arguments increasing to the point of verbal or physical violence, follow your instincts and leave the situation. If you are the person losing control remove yourself from your child. If you are concerned about your safety or the safety of your child, leave your home immediately with your child. There are many local resources available to you in your community and state. For your child's benefit and yours, please make use of resources as needs arise.

#### **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 and watch an ant on the sidewalk - gives all of you the chance to enjoy being together and to reconnect.

## Resources for Families

**State Veterans Affairs Offices:** Veterans of the United States armed forces may be eligible for a broad range of programs and services provided by Veterans Affairs (VA). Eligibility for most VA benefits is based on discharge from active military service under other than dishonorable conditions, and certain benefits require service during wartime. This Web site will help you find your state's VA office: <http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm>

**VA Caregivers Support:** VA offers a number of services that can provide you with the support that's right for you. Whether you and the Veteran you care for could use some help at home or you just need someone to listen, they're available to support you. <http://www.caregiver.va.gov>

**Wounded Warrior Resource Call Center (WWRCC):** The Department of Defense's WWRCC was created in September 2008 to provide Service members and Veterans who have become wounded, ill, or injured—as well as their immediate families and their primary caregivers—with a single point of contact for assistance with reporting deficiencies in covered military facilities, obtaining health care services, receiving benefits information, and any other difficulties encountered while supporting wounded warriors. Wounded Warrior consultants collaborate with representatives working with the Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2), the Marine Wounded Warrior Regiment, the Navy SAFE HARBOR program, and the Air Force Wounded Warrior program. The service support programs are the primary avenues of support for the wounded and their families; the Center continues to connect members and families as requested to resources such as Military OneSource and can provide a liaison with other federal agencies and nonprofit organizations. The WWRCC can be reached toll free at 800-342-9647.

**WWRCC Web site:** The WWRCC Web site provides wounded Service members and Veterans, as well as their families and caregivers, with information that they need in the areas of military facilities, health care services, and benefits. It supports access to the WWRCC and trained specialists who are available 24/7 by phone at 800-342-9647 or by e-mail at [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com). Information is also available on how to connect with other families for support and recreation. To access this Web site, visit [www.woundedwarriorresourcecenter.com](http://www.woundedwarriorresourcecenter.com)

**National Resource Directory (NRD):** The NRD is a Web-based "yellow book" for wounded, ill, and injured Service members, Veterans, their families, and those who support them. The Directory provides over 10,000 services and resources available through governmental and nongovernmental organizations to support recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration into the community. To access the NRD, visit [www.nationalresourcedirectory.org](http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.org)

**Iraq–Afghanistan Veterans of America:** Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) is the first and largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Their mission is to improve the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans and their families through programs in four key impact areas: supporting new Veterans in **Health, Education, Employment**, and building a lasting **Community** for vets and their families (HEEC). <http://www.iava.org>

**Wounded Warrior Project:** Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) takes a holistic approach when serving warriors and their families to nurture the mind and body, and encourage economic empowerment and engagement. Through a high-touch and interactive approach, WWP hopes to foster the most successful, well-adjusted generation of wounded Service members in our nation's history. <https://woundedwarriorproject.org>

**Child Care Aware of America (formerly NACCRA):** Child Care Aware® of America works with more than 600 state and local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies to ensure that families in every local community have access to quality, affordable child care. They lead projects that increase the quality and availability of child care, offer comprehensive training to child care professionals, undertake groundbreaking research, and advocate for child care policies that positively impact the lives of children and families. <http://www.naccra.org>

**ZERO TO THREE:** ZERO TO THREE, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families is a national, non-profit offering a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The Military Family Projects web page offers information and resources designed to support military and Veteran parents as they support their youngest children. [www.zerotothree.org/military](http://www.zerotothree.org/military)

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This brochure is based in part on information and insights from the following works:

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We extend special thanks to the following individuals who helped to shape and edit this brochure:

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A special thank you to the Department of Veterans Affairs for their review of these materials.

We especially acknowledge the contribution and leadership of Jane Steinen, Program Specialist (MRZ-3), and Michael Berger, Deputy Branch Head, Family Readiness Branch (MRZ), Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, Personal and Family Readiness Division, Quantico, VA.



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Robert R. McCormick Foundation- Investing in Early Education since 1993

ZERO TO THREE gratefully acknowledges the McCormick Foundation for its support of Coming Together Around Veteran Families™

ZERO TO THREE gratefully acknowledges Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Personal and Family Readiness Division, for making the original edition of this booklet possible.

Published by:



[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-1-938558-06-1

Writer: Amy Dombro

Design: Austin Metze Design

Photo credits: Cover - KIWI Street Studio;

inside front cover - Julia Yeary;

page 2 - Allison Silberberg