

Getting to Know Your Child Again

Deployment and reunion can be stressful for every family but for the single parent there are special concerns. Often, during the deployment, the child is cared for away from the home by a non custodial parent, other relative or friend. Return and reunion means homecoming, not only for the parent but also for the child. In these cases the child must readjust to the home environment as well as to being with the parent again.

When you return, you will have to get to know your child(ren) again. Rebuilding trust and closeness takes time. Remember that child(ren) want to be close again but they don't always know exactly what to do. Here are some ways you can help them:

- ◆ Take it easy and let things happen naturally. Don't force your child(ren) to hug or play with you. Give your child(ren) "warm up" time to readjust to you at their own pace.
- ◆ Arrange a special time with each child to reconnect (have a picnic, ride a carousel, go to the video arcade, etc.).
- ◆ Spend time with your child(ren) looking at the family scrapbook, their artwork, schoolwork, etc.
- ◆ Show an interest in the everyday events of your child(ren)'s lives.
- ◆ Find out what new interests your child(ren) developed while you were away.
- ◆ Praise your child(ren) for helping out while you were away.
- ◆ Give each child a "bravery medal" for being brave while you were gone.
- ◆ Discuss your feelings about returning and encourage your child(ren) to do the same.
- ◆ Listen sensitively to your child(ren). Let them know you are interested and ready to hear all they have to say.
- ◆ Ease back into family routines.
- ◆ Discipline your child(ren) with care and love. Seek help from the Family Support Center or Family Advocacy on your installation, if needed.



Custodial vs Noncustodial

For Custodial Parents:

- ◆ Child(ren) may have bonded with their caregiver. Their loyalty to the caregiver may be painful for you. You may feel unneeded or even jealous.
- ◆ Consider the impact of your relationship with your child(ren) as well as with the caregiver.
- ◆ Focus on communicating with the caregiver and your child(ren).
- ◆ Give yourself and your child(ren) adequate time to transition.
- ◆ This adjustment may be awkward and take several weeks
- ◆ You can smooth the transition process by actively involving the caregiver with the transition.
- ◆ Since child(ren) have lived with different family rules and procedures, take time to compare them with the rules of your home.



For Non-Custodial Parents:

- ◆ Your child(ren)'s living conditions haven't changed, but your visits have been curtailed.
- ◆ Communicate with their custodial parent to re-establish your visits.
- ◆ Remember you and your child(ren) have grown and everyone will need to take time to get reacquainted.

Communication with Caregiver

- ◆ Make a smooth transition from caregiver to parent, keeping routines as normal as possible.
- ◆ Talk to the caregiver about how your child(ren) may have changed while you have been away.

Feelings And Emotions

- ◆ Child(ren) could be apprehensive, quiet, and/or nervous
- ◆ Observe feelings of anxiety and allow time for mixed emotions. Let them know it is normal to take time to catch up with each other.
- ◆ Talk about new friends and favorite activities.
- ◆ Observe child(ren)'s behaviors, discuss with parent/caregivers as needed.
- ◆ Seek advice. Schedule a counseling session and share observations with parents/caregivers and teachers.
- ◆ Child(ren) assume everything will be exactly the same.
- ◆ Allow time for child(ren) to adjust.

Take Care Of Yourself

In order to be an effective parent you need to take good care of yourself. Manage your stress by:

- ◆ Eating right
- ◆ Getting enough rest
- ◆ Exercise
- ◆ Relaxation techniques
- ◆ Spending time with friends

You may feel guilty taking time out for yourself but remember it makes you a better parent. Give Parents a Break is available for childcare. Barter childcare with friends so kids think of this as play dates rather than being with a babysitter.

Go Slowly

Preparing to Return Checklist

Use the checklist below as a guide to help prepare you and your family for your return.

AS A PARENT:

- Write a letter to each child to plan a special event.
- Remind each child how much I have missed him or her and that I look forward to coming home.
- Reassure my child(ren) that my love for them is constant, even if other things have changed.
- Talk about my feelings about returning home.
- Think about the mixed emotions I have about coming home.
- Think about my child(ren) and how each might react to my return.
- Realize young child(ren) will need time to know and adjust to me.
- Think about how I'll make the transition from airman to parent again, and that I need to treat my family as a family and not as a military unit.
- Think about the problems I left behind and how I will cope with them .

AS A FAMILY:

- Plan a reintegration celebration.
- Talk about not expecting a perfect reintegration.
- Talk about everyone in the family changing in some way while I've been away.
- Talk about how stressful change is for everyone.
- Recognize that it might take time for all of us to readjust.

<http://mfrc.calib.com/healthyparenting>

Community Resources

If you feel like you are having trouble coping with adjustment, contact one of the agencies listed below.

- ◆ **Mental Health**
Crisis Intervention
Stress Management
- ◆ **Family Advocacy**
Prevention program
New Parents Support Program
Consultation and Referral
- ◆ **Airman & Family Readiness Center**
Financial Counseling
Air Force Aid Society/Give Parents A Break
Personal and Worklife Education
Military Family Life Consultants
- ◆ **Chapel**
Counseling Sessions
Marriage Enrichment
- ◆ **Youth Center**
Child and Youth Behavioral Military Family Life Counselors
- ◆ **DoDDS Counselors**

Web Resources

www.deploymentconnections.org
www.militarychild.org
<http://www.mfrc-dodqol.org/healthyparenting/index.cfm>
<http://singleparentsnetwork.com/>
<http://childparenting.about.com/cs/parentsupport/a/militaryparent2.htm>
www.hooah4health.com
www.militaryonesource.com
www.usuhs.mil/psy/courage.html

HQ USAF Caring for People
Airman and Family Services Division
201 12th Street South, Suite 413
Arlington, VA 22202-4306



CARING
AIR FORCE
PEOPLE

Coming Home
A Guide for Single
Parents Returning
From Deployment

