

## Children & Reunion

### **Expectations**

Change is at least as stressful for children as it is for adults. The homecoming of the military 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 skilled at coping with their stress in large part because they have little life experience. As a result, they may temporarily act out or regress to a less mature stage of behaviour as a part of their reaction. In any event, there will be a readjustment period-- typically 4 to 6 weeks--for the entire family. You can greatly enhance your family's reunion by developing realistic expectations of how your child will respond to the military parent's return based upon the child's age. So let's discuss what you can generally expect of different age children, and how you can facilitate the reunion process with your children. As you know, children are not "miniature adults," but rather developing individuals who change rapidly in their thought and behaviour patterns. So, a 1 year-old and a 5 year-old will respond very differently to your returning.

#### Infants (Birth to 1 year)

- An infant has not yet developed much of an ability to remember people and events. Accordingly, as painful as this might be for you to consider, do not expect baby to recognize the parent who has returned from a long deployment; instead, expect him/her to initially react as if the military parent were a stranger. The infant will likely cry when held by the military parent, pull away, fuss, and cling to the person who was his/her primary caregiver during the deployment. Once again, "go slow." The baby will "warm up" to the military parent at his/her own pace.
- The newly returned parent should gently get involved in holding, hugging, bathing, feeding, playing with, and otherwise caring for the baby.
- The key is to be patient and let your baby's reactions be your guide in terms of what pace to proceed in getting acquainted.

#### Toddlers (1 - 3 years)

- A typical toddler response would be to hide from the newly returned parent, to cling to his/her primary caregiver, cry, and perhaps regress to soiling if he/she is potty trained. Again, give your child space and time to warm up to the military parent.
- It helps for the military parent to sit at eye level with your child (to look less intimidating) and talk with him/her. A gentle offer by the military parent to play with the toddler may be helpful, but do not force the issue. Doing so will only intensify your child's discomfort and resistance.
- Also, it may have helped the child to more clearly remember the deployed parent if the stay behind caregiver frequently showed him/her pictures of the military member and said "Daddy" or "Mommy," as the case may be. This is true because for children at this age, the old adage "out of sight, out of mind" aptly applies.

#### Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)

- Children in this age range tend to think as though the world revolved around them (egocentric thinking). Keeping that in mind, it's not surprising that your preschooler may think he/she somehow made the military parent go away. Or that the military parent left because he or she no longer cared about the child. If this is the case with your preschooler, he or she may feel guilty or abandoned. As a result, your child may express intense anger as a way of keeping the military parent at a distance, thereby "protecting" himself/herself from further disappointment.
- Your preschooler is also likely to do some limit testing (see if familiar rules still apply). To promote the reunion process, wise parents will accept the child's feelings, not act overly concerned, and focus on rewarding positive behaviours. It is good for the military parent to talk with the toddler about his or her areas of interest, be it storybooks, toys, or whatever and give the preschooler some undivided attention. Meanwhile, the military parent should support the other parent's enforcement of family rules but be careful about too quickly stepping into an authoritative role. The toddler needs time to adjust to the military parent once again being an active participant in his/her life.

#### School Age (5 - 12 years)

- Children in this age range are likely to give returning parents a very warm reception if the parent-child relationship was strong before the separation. The school age child may excitedly run to the military parent as soon as the parent gets off the plane. He/she will be inclined to try to monopolize the military parent's attention and "talk your ear off" during the drive home and then want to show-off scrapbooks, hobby items, or school projects when the military parent gets home.
- If, on the other hand, the military parent's relationship with the school age child was strained, the child may fear the military parent will punish him/her for all the child's misbehaviour during the deployment. Such a thought process may lead the child to at first be shy or withdrawn around the newly returned parent.
- At any rate, it is best for the military parent to have friendly interest in what the child has done during the time of deployment and praise him/her for his/her efforts and accomplishments.

#### Adolescent (13 - 18 years)

- As you already know if you're the parent of an adolescent, they can have mood swings that go up and down like a roller coaster. One moment they are solving problems in a reasonable and logical way and the next may be reacting in a purely emotional and childlike fashion. So, your adolescent's reaction to your return may be characterized by mixed emotions. Like the school age child, your adolescent will likely be very excited to see the military parent again, if the relationship was amicable prior to the deployment.



- Sometimes, however, adolescents are reticent to publicly express their emotions and may be more concerned about acting "cool" in front of their peers.
- Adolescents tend to be very sensitive about being unfavourably judged or criticized. With this in mind, be sure to make time to discuss with your adolescent what is going on in his/her life as well as what you've experienced.
- As with sons and daughters of any age, it's critical to give your adolescent some of each parent's undivided pleasant attention.

## **Single Parents**

If you're a single parent and in the military, you may be experiencing some unique concerns about reuniting with your children. More specifically, if you're a custodial parent, have you thought about how your children have bonded with their caregiver during your absence and how that will impact your relationship with your children as well as with the caregiver? If, on the other hand, someone else has primary custody of your child, you may wonder how your child will respond to you since you have likely missed "regular" visits with him/her.

Strategies for coping with these situations are very similar to those described in the Reunion and Children section. There are however, a few additional issues to consider. If you're a custodial parent, then your children probably have been living with someone else for several months. Accordingly, to the extent this has been a fulfilling relationship, the bond between this caregiver and your children has strengthened. Your children's increased loyalty to their caregiver may be painful for you in that you may initially feel unneeded or even jealous. Again, go slow.

Focus on communicating both with the caregiver and your children, and recognize that you and your children will need to adapt to living with each other again. Your children have been living with someone else who probably had different rules and procedures compared to your own household. Give yourself and your children adequate time to "shift gears". The adjustment period, which may take several weeks, can at times be awkward. You can smooth the transition process by first of all actively involving the caregiver with the transition. To force young children to suddenly separate from the caregiver can be emotionally traumatic. Secondly, since your children have lived with different family rules and procedures, take time to compare with them the rules of your home. As you're doing this, seek your children's inputs regarding how they would prefer life at home to be. They need to feel included in the process of re-establishing the structure and "flavour" of your home environment.

If you are a non-custodial parent, your children's living conditions were probably not impacted by your deployment. Your visits with your children have, however, been curtailed. As you re-establish these visits, remember you and your children have grown and you will need to take time to get reacquainted.



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