

- **Include the returning parent in your everyday routines and interactions even if your child is rejecting that parent.** Children take their cues from their parents. If you talk positively about and include the returning parent, it sends an important message. For example, "I'm happy Mommy is home. I really missed her. Let's ask her to read the story tonight." Or, "Let's show Daddy how you wash your tummy when you take your bath."
- **Arrange for the returning parent and your child to spend small amounts of one-on-one time together and slowly build on those experiences.** You might all start reading a book together and then have the parent who was not deployed go into another room. Slowly, as your child and the returning parent reconnect, give them the chance to spend more time alone together, maybe going to the park or doing errands.



When a Service Member Returns With a Combat Stress Injury

Unfortunately, some Service members experience combat stress injuries while deployed. The injury can be caused by a traumatic event (or events) or the buildup of low-level stress over time. These kinds of injuries can affect the brain's ability to handle and adapt to stress, sights, sounds, movements, and memories.

When you are living with a stress injury, you may find yourself on automatic pilot while feeding, bathing, dressing, and keeping your child safe. You are there physically but not emotionally. You may not get pleasure from the smiles, silly songs and games, laughter, and joy that you usually share together. It's even possible that you may get to a point when you are not able to take care of your child's basic needs. This is a sign that you need to seek help from a mental health professional.

For more on coping with combat stress injuries, refer to the handout on *Coping When a Service Member Is Injured*.



- **Talk together about how you will go about coparenting.** Sometimes the returning parent does not want to set limits with the child, understandably not wanting to be the "bad guy." 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 the tough issues, like discipline, or angry about the returning parent taking over. Communication is key. Share your thoughts and feelings. Listen to the other's perspective. Think together about what role each of you will play and then support one another. Working effectively together as you parent is one of the most important ways you support and nurture your child.

Resources

Military OneSource

www.militaryonesource.com is available 24/7 to connect families with services including free counseling services in person, by phone, and online. Or call 800-342-9647.

Joint Family Support Assistance Program (JFSAP)

www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil supports families who are geographically dispersed from a military installation providing services in local communities through collaborative partnerships with federal, state, and local resources.

ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE's mission is to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military.

Source

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National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Taking care of yourself and your baby



Reunification

As saying good-bye is often so difficult, it seems saying hello should be easy. But homecoming can be stressful. Feelings of tension, confusion, and disappointment, whether you are returning or have been the one at home, are very normal reactions.

For your child, homecoming means big changes. There is someone "new" at home to get to know again or in some cases for the first time. At the same time, the adult your child has depended on all these months may also be feeling stressed about this transition. Familiar routines are probably changing. This means that your child may need your reassurance and extra support at a time when you are feeling in need of a hug yourself.

The more steady and secure you feel, the better able you will be to offer your child comfort and support. Remind yourself that reconnecting takes time and that, while joyous, homecoming can be a bumpy ride. So be patient: with yourself, with your partner/spouse, and with your child. Everyone needs time and support. Also keep in mind that while it can be a challenging time, reuniting is an opportunity to renegotiate roles and connect with each other and your child in new, positive ways.

What It's Like for You

Tuning in to and managing your own feelings is an important way you support your child. Some common experiences for the parent who has been at home include feeling:

- **Angry with your spouse or partner.** Even though you have been missing him or her, it's

common to experience these types of emotions.

- **Excited, but also anxious.** You may be concerned about your relationship: “How has my partner changed?” “Will we get along after being apart for so long?” “Will he or she look or act differently?”
- **Worried about how your child will respond.** An often unspoken question left hanging in the air is, “Will my child remember the parent who has been away?”

What It’s Like for the Returning Parent

- If your child was born during deployment, the returning father might feel instantly connected. 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. It can take time for him to feel comfortable being alone with his child.
- It can be crushing for the returning parent if their child is not warm and loving, or is outright rejecting. As difficult as it sounds, they should try not to take it personally. The return has likely brought up some difficult feelings for your child because of his deep love for the *parent* he has missed. He might feel sad or angry at missing them. He is not mature enough to really understand or manage the feelings in a rational way. While it is only natural for the returning parent to feel like withdrawing, what your child needs most is the steady presence of both his parents and lots of love. Over time, as he sees that you are there for him no matter what, he will regain the sense of safety and security with you he so benefits from and needs.

Supporting Your Child During the Homecoming

- A child’s development and temperament impact how she copes with challenging situations. Keep in mind that most babies go through stages in which they can be fearful of unfamiliar people, including family members they haven’t seen for a while. This is especially true around 7–9 months of age.
- 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. Your child may smile and/or reach for or run toward the parent she hasn’t seen for so long. Or, she 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 someone, even a person she has known and loved, for a long time.

What You Can Do

To Prepare for the Homecoming

- **Talk with your partner/spouse in advance about homecoming.** Topics you may want to discuss include:
 - Who the returning parent wants to see the first day and weeks home
 - Foods he or she wants to eat
 - Activities you want to do together
 - Your feelings about being back together again—excitement as well as fears
 - What kind of support you want from each other
- **Tell your toddler or 2-year-old what is going to happen one or two days before the deployed parent will return.** Young children do not have a firm sense of time, so telling them about their parent’s return too far in advance can be confusing and anxiety producing. Often, return dates change and waiting until a few days before can help eliminate disappointment for your child. If you have a child who is able to put her thoughts and feelings into words, ask what’s on her mind. Talking about feelings is very important for coping with change.

On Homecoming Day

- **Follow your child’s lead.** Is she looking at the returning parent in the eye? Reaching her arms out to show she is ready to be picked up by the returning parent? Or is she looking away? Clinging to the parent who has been home with her, “saying” she needs some space and time to feel comfortable with the parent she’s been separated from? As the mother of a toddler says about homecomings: “Let your child set the pace of reconciliation, even though it might be killing you inside.”
- **Adjust your celebration to fit your child.** If she is easily overwhelmed, or doesn’t like crowds, consider a quiet dinner at home rather than having a big party. 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 new recipe or worry that your child’s pants are torn. Just focus on enjoying being together.

The Days and Weeks After Homecoming

Feeling connected again can take time and isn’t always easy, no matter how much you love the person you have been separated from.

What You Can Do

- **Spend time all together.** Being together as a family gives your child the support of the parent who was home while he starts feeling comfortable with the parent who has just returned.

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