Levels of Reintegration

Adjusting to home life after being deployed can be challenging on many levels. Service members may experience three levels of transition after returning home to their families. The most basic transition is reconnecting after separation. Reconnecting can be a challenge when family members have gotten used to their own routines. Preschoolers may not recognize the returning service member and may feel anxious to be with them at first. Parents may have differing discipline expectations.

The second level of transition addresses the skill set needed in a war zone compared to the home front. The same skills that can keep a service member alive while deployed can undermine relationships at home and at work. Switching skill sets may require support and feedback. For example, the ADAPT (After Deployment: Adaptive Parenting Tools) program may help soldiers with parenting skills that strengthen relationships with their children.

The last level of transition deals with the challenges of recovering from traumatic events. Intense experiences such as witnessing the death of a friend may cause feelings of isolation, depression, or the need to escape. While a supportive network of family and friends can help take the edge off for many returning service members, some may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms that require professional help. The next ADAPT newsletter will focus on identifying PTSD and the effects of PTSD on children.

Relating to Your Partner after Deployment

Sometimes dealing with children and their needs seems to take up all your time and energy, but having a good relationship with your partner is key to family well-being. This holds true for all types of families: married, single, or divorced. Investing in adult relationships can make a big difference in keeping you strong emotionally and physically. Try some of these tips:

1. Exercise together—maybe try something new like dancing or yoga.
2. Take a walk in a park or forest preserve together. Research shows spending time in nature is calming and reinvigorating.
3. Spend 10 minutes together to talk and reconnect each day.
4. Shake up the routine and go out to lunch.
5. Steal away for an evening or a weekend if a sitter is available.
6. Celebrate special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, and meeting personal goals.

Your Preschooler:
- Is learning to express emotions, but may experience mood swings.
- Has an exploding vocabulary, and may ask a lot of questions.
- May have a hard time telling the difference between what is real and what is pretend.
- May be asserting their independence with the words “No!” and “Mine.” They will get better with sharing as they get older.

Parent Tips:
- Don’t take it personally if your little one pulls away or is shy around the returning parent. This can be hard, but it try to be patient and take time to let them adjust. Bend or kneel down to be at their level and show you are listening.
- Spend some one-on-one time with your preschooler each day. This could be quiet, snuggling time reading a book, playing make believe with them, or wrestling and climbing together.
Creating or continuing family rituals can be a great way to reconnect with family members. Rituals can help families build a sense of identity and give both parents and children something to look forward to. It is the emotional feelings of belonging or excitement that make rituals different than ordinary routines. These events can be weekly, monthly, annual or even random rituals.

Rituals are times to problem solve, talk, have fun, and build memories together. Children love rituals because they provide a sense of security and stability in a stressful world. Preschool children enjoy repetition and regular schedules, even something as simple as reading together each night.

To get started, evaluate what you are already doing. What are your holiday traditions? Do you have things you do together weekly or monthly? Do you have alone time with each of your kids? How do you celebrate special events like birthdays or the end of school?

Here are some rules of thumb to follow. Keep things simple so that a new ritual does not become overwhelming. Also, rituals should not be costly because if they create financial anxiety, they will not last. Focus on having fun together or relaxing together—either way you get a break from your regular routine. Turn off the cell phones and electronics and steer conversation away from work, school and obligations. As you are flexible and enjoy the time together, family bonds will be strengthened.

ADAPT is gearing up for the next wave of the project. You can help us better understand reintegration in military families and have a say in future resources and services provided to reintegrating military families!

If you live in Minnesota, are a parent of a 5-12 year old, and have been deployed (or your spouse/partner has been deployed) since 2001, we want to hear from you!

To learn more about the ADAPT project, go to www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt. For more information, you can call us at 612-624-4830 or e-mail us at adapt@umn.edu.

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