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. Parents may have differing discipline expectations. While school-aged kids may be excited to have their mom or dad home, they may also be angry or fearful of another deployment.

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 service members 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 daily 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 School-Aged Child:

- May compare themselves to other kids and start seeing themselves as unique.
- Can face bullying and teasing in school and need support from parents in dealing with these issues.
- May have a limited attention span (15-20 minutes) that expands as they grow older.
- Enjoys playing with language, for example telling jokes and riddles.

Parent Tips:

- Take opportunities to spend time answering questions when they come up. Questions from school-aged kids may seem repetitive and they may need to hear the answer more than once for it to sink in.
- If school-aged kids withdraw from family and seem moody or angry, it may be helpful to realize they may be protecting themselves from feelings of worry or sadness. Remember that it takes time to rebuild relationships and try to be patient and understanding.
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. School age kids enjoy being part of the planning process and having input into family time.

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 too 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.

Creating Family Rituals

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.

Contact Information:
Dept. of Family Social Science
University of Minnesota
Rm. 290 McNH
1985 Buford Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108
adapt@umn.edu
612-624-4830

http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt

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How PTSD Affects Reintegration